

SPINSTER ECOLOGY:
RETHINKING RELATION IN THE AMERICAN LITERARY ENVIRONMENT

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Sarah Elizabeth Ensor

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Sarah Elizabeth Ensor, Ph.D.

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Spinster Ecology develops a practice of queer ecocriticism by articulating intersections between nineteenth-century American literature and twentieth-century environmental thought. Focusing on texts by Sarah Orne Jewett, Henry David Thoreau, and Rachel Carson in which attention to the natural world is interwoven with a particularly reticent form of social interaction, the dissertation argues for the relational capacity of interpersonal and environmental forces typically understood to preclude connection: distance and remoteness, absence and silence, backwardness and death. Rethinking these categories as relational helps both to identify and to remedy a theoretical impasse that currently divides queer theory from ecocriticism: namely, the fields' conflicting stances toward (reproductive) futurity and toward the status of desire, pleasure, and limitation. Early attempts at queering ecocriticism have tended to emphasize non-normative uses of natural spaces or to trouble the conceptions of nature and "the natural" that undergird mainstream environmentalism. My project, by contrast, locates queer theory's contribution to ecocriticism in questions of temporality, sociality, and tone. More specifically, I identify the spinster as a model for paradigms of relation, transmission, and inheritance that are indirect or askance. Taking heed of spinsterliness not only as a characterological or biographical phenomenon but also in its formal and stylistic instantiations, I argue, can help queer ecocriticism better engage literature. Whereas ecocritics tend to apologize for the way in which their attention to texts distances them from political engagement and the physical environment alike, this project makes a case for literariness in part by making a case for the relational and ethical capacities of distance itself.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sarah Ensor was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1982. She received a B.A. in English from the University of Michigan in 2003 and taught literature at Phillips Academy (Andover), The Loomis Chaffee School, and the University of Michigan's New England Literature Program before beginning graduate study at Cornell University.

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PREFACE: "TOUCH, —"

In a project concerned with forms of distance, perhaps it makes sense to begin at a remove: not with the American literature that will preoccupy the chapters that follow, but with a voice from across the Atlantic; not with the mid-to-late nineteenth century, but with the close of the eighteenth; not with paragraphs of prose but instead with the final lines of a narrative poem. At the end of William Wordsworth's "Nutting," the speaker recounts the "sense of pain" that he experienced after despoiling a hidden bower before shifting registers into a timeless, indeterminate command:

Then up I rose,
And dragged to earth both branch and bough, with crash
And merciless ravage; and the shady nook
Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower,
Deformed and sullied, patiently gave up
Their quiet being: and, unless I now
Confound my present feelings with the past,
Even then, when from the bower I turned away,
Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings,
I felt a sense of pain when I beheld
The silent trees and the intruding sky. —

Then, dearest Maiden, move along these shades
In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand
Touch, — for there is a Spirit in the woods.¹

While many readers seek a proto-environmentalist ethic in these final three lines,² finding in the speaker's seeming regret a Romantic anticipation of the contemporary rhetoric imploring us to

¹ William Wordsworth, "Nutting," *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), ll. 41-54.

² To give just one example: in the section of the introduction to *The Environmental Imagination* in which he develops "a rough checklist of some of the ingredients that might be said to comprise an environmentally oriented work," Lawrence Buell invokes "Nutting" as the exemplar of one of these ingredients: "3. *Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation.* By this standard, William Wordsworth's 'Nutting' comes closer to being an environmental text than his 'Tintern Abbey,' insofar as the function of landscape in the latter is chiefly to activate the speaker's subjective feelings of rejuvenation and anxiety, whereas the former reminiscence prompts him to tell a self-incriminating tale of his youthful violation of the hazel grove." (7-8)

“Take Only Pictures; Leave Only Footprints” (or, more simply, to “Leave No Trace”), the “gentleness” and “gentle” at the end of the poem do not command restraint but instead describe and condition *action*: “with gentle hand/Touch, — ” the speaker commands. Touch. But what? The dearest Maiden’s is a touch without an object, a touch without contact, an act of reaching out and seeking, fingers extended, arm prone. Whereas the acts of violence in the bower are transitive – the speaker “dragged to earth both branch and bough,” “the hazels, and the green and mossy bower,/Deformed and sullied,” in turn “patiently gave up/Their quiet being” – the seemingly redemptive commands that follow are not: “move along these shades / In gentleness of heart”; “with gentle hand/Touch, —.”³ It is as if the descriptors that condition the action have somehow (to borrow and modify Sharon Cameron’s phrase) gentled transitivity out of existence.⁴ The gentleness of the Wordsworthian command stems from the fact that, rather than leading directly to objects, it accompanies or is accompanied by them: the dearest Maiden is to “move *along* the shades.” And so we’re left to wonder about that mysteriously intransitive command with which the poem concludes, and to ponder the indefinite protraction of a touch not concluded by a (definitive) object. For some period of time, at least, Wordsworth’s maiden will simply touch *with*, touch *along*, touch *toward* – in other words, she will simply relate. Her *touch*, then, seems more akin to a contemplative verb like *look* than it does to a gesture concerned with contact; its patience constitutes both its persistence and its apparent restraint. If there is an

³ I don’t mean to suggest that these two intransitive verbs are of a kind. The command begins with the kind of intransitivity achieved through a self-reflexive gesture. “Move,” after all, can be either a transitive or intransitive verb – I can move the chair to the table, or I can move (myself) along a shade. That parenthetical “myself” recalls the way in which Sarah Orne Jewett sometimes seems to transform transitive verbs like preservation into an intransitive mood through self-reflexivity: to self-preserve, that is to say, ultimately comes to feel a lot like an intransitive verb like to persist. The final command is perhaps the poem’s most striking moment, given its unexpected and inexplicable intransitivity: with gentle hand/Touch.” Here we see Wordsworth playing with the mandates of language, and forcing us to imagine for ourselves what a touch without a concrete or grammatical object entails.

⁴ Cameron’s phrase is “gentles distinction out of existence.” Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins U P, 1979), 175. Hereafter cited in the text.

environmental ethos here, it comes not in any commandment to refrain from touching but instead in an imperative to consider the possibility of a touch defined less by object than by duration and tone.

And so if there is something redemptive about the way that Wordsworth's poem ends, if the command itself (or its promised results) can ameliorate the violence of the preceding lines, that force seems to emerge precisely through trusting touch while (and through) rethinking its parameters. If we are to attend to the problems we have caused by intervening in the natural order, the poem suggests, the solution is not to retreat, not to have no impact, and not to attempt to elide or erase our presence. We might instead engage within an intransitive register, focusing on the mode of our relations, on their affect, on the ethical potential present within forms of extension and participation and persistence that are not object-centered.⁵ I am far from the first to find a model for action in these final lines; Anne-Lise François concludes her Wordsworthian critique of biotechnology with a remarkable reading of that final verb's objectlessness:

According to a well-known irony, the concluding admonishment to Wordsworth's "Nutting" risks being perhaps as heavy-handed a signpost as any against which it is warning: "Then, dearest Maiden, move along these shades/In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand/Touch – for there is a spirit in the woods." Environmentalist imperatives can often be heard to echo the command "With gentle hand/Touch – ," in asking that we assume such presences, such powers to be hurt, without waiting on evidence of them; indeed secular posthumanists go even further in seeking to enjoin caution without relying upon the explanatory afterthought "for there is a spirit in the woods." In Wordsworth's lines, the verb "touch" never receives an object but, enjambed and suspended by a dash, takes instead the full weight of the accentual fall, as if the touching enjoined were its own

⁵ This intransitivity, of course, need not be indefinite or absolute; the fact that Wordsworth's "Touch, —" necessarily tends toward contact and an object does not lessen my interest in – or the importance of – its emphasis on delay or protraction: in other words, on the reaching itself. Likewise, this project's emphasis on the fact of relation rather than the objects thereof certainly does not mean to suggest a disregard for the elements of the natural world that we typically understand ourselves to be relating *to*; it simply seeks to understand attention to the tonality of our gestures and our modes of relation as an important part of an environmental(ist) *ethos*.

deferral, a mode of touching so in love it never came to grasp. Only this redeems it from a prudery that would be as masterful as exploitative objectification.⁶

But what if we took this a step farther, and understood the poem as potentially indifferent about the presence of “such powers to be hurt,” as somehow unconcerned with the presence (or absence) of the objects of our touch?⁷ For what “Nutting” models is indeed the extent to which this *objectless* “mode of touching” can be “so in love it never [comes] to grasp”; what it models, in other words, is the affective capacity of the very gesture of relation itself. The commanded action avoids prudery because of this work of extension, because of this gesture of perpetual and somehow constitutive deferral; by depicting a touch not bounded by object and not culminating in contact, Wordsworth forces us to consider what touch is without the something that it touches, what happens when the verb loses the transitivity that we understand as lying at its very core. Whereas a reading of the poem’s ending as censure or restraint or prudery would suggest a kind of affective foreclosure at the heart of an environmental ethos, “Nutting” instead seems to suggest the capacity for investment that can emerge when we look *beyond or beside* the objects which customarily dictate the patterns of our attention, relation, and touch.

Indeed, while the speaker’s description of his initial state of mind within the bower is the feeling of being “with wise restraint/Voluptuous, fearless of a rival...,” (21-22) – a formulation whose enjambment suggests a productive tension between the act of restraint and the condition of voluptuousness, and yields a tenuous balance between restraint and desire – we might understand the wise maiden’s act at the end as inscribing a kind of “wise restraint voluptuous,” eliminating the line break and incorporating or assimilating these customarily countervailing

⁶ Anne-Lise François, “‘O Happy Living Things’: Frankenfoods and the Bounds of Wordsworthian Natural Piety,” (*Diacritics* 33.2 [Summer, 2003]), 68. Hereafter cited in the text.

⁷ Important to note here is that “indifference” need not mean disregard. I am using the former term more as it functions in Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, where – as my first chapter will discuss – there are as many ways to be investedly indifferent as there are to be interested.

forces. This new “wise restraint voluptuous” (particularly if we take restraint here not as a figure for inaction but instead as a term for a reaching that never reaches) highlights and exemplifies the radical potential of non-object-centered modes of relation.⁸ The affect dwells in the reach rather than in the reaching, in the process of engagement rather than in any given end thereof. This intransitive “Touch —” is not a mode of disregarding or devaluing objects; rather, it is a way of considering the affective, epistemological, and environmental consequences of our mode of reaching, of our ways of being in relation (to).

In keeping with the possibilities promised by this “wise restraint voluptuous,” my project aims to reconsider the binary oppositions that we typically draw between such terms as action and restraint, or investment and indifference – and to raise the possibility of developing an ethic (or even an activist practice) predicated on affirmative forms of distance or reticence. When we think of environmental investment in relational terms, our rhetoric tends to be dominated by forms of closeness and proximity: We love the planet. We become better stewards through gaining knowledge and familiarity. We privilege the local, the intimate, the experienced, the

⁸ When we begin to ask these questions of (non-normative) relationality and affect, it seems reasonable to turn to a critical discourse known for being attuned to such issues: queer theory. However, as the introduction to this project will discuss in far more detail, ecocriticism and queer theory have not readily come into conversation with each other, and at some junctures have expressed open hostility toward one another. Where ecocriticism (thanks to its political association with environmentalism) often concerns itself with forms of limitation and restraint – so much so that to imagine a “Touch —,” however intransitive, at the heart of its *ethos* may be jarring – queer theory is invested in an unapologetic Touch and its accompanying pleasures. In the mind of many a queer theorist, nothing can redeem environmentalism from the “prudery” that plagues it. (In her essay “Toward a Queer Ecofeminism,” for instance, Greta Gaard deems environmentalism “erotophobic.”) It’s worth noting that what tentative bridges have begun to connect the two fields have been built by ecocritics with investments – personal, political, or theoretical – in queer topics. Although queer theorists have become much more interested in recent years in questions of space, geography, and landscape, few have veered into terrain that could readily be called “ecocritical” – something I say not to police the bounds of ecocriticism, but because I think queer theorists’ avoidance of “environmental” questions is real, persistent, and important to acknowledge. Lee Edelman, for one, has deemed a queer ecocriticism (or an ecocritical queer theory) impossible. His is an (implicit) challenge that this project takes to heart. The final section of this preface will turn to queer theory more explicitly.

known. Although I am certainly not opposed to these approaches *per se*, I do think it is important – for reasons that will become clearer as my pages unfold – to expand our definitions of investment, to acknowledge the ways in which (for example) anonymity, absence, distance, and reticence can yield deeply ethical modes of environmental and interpersonal relation alike. Doing so might help us understand – and work with – the paradoxical fact that, although our understanding of our own capacities for investment tends to be expressed in terms of closeness, our privileged environmental(ist) actions are so often predicated on restraint and (self-)limitation. When we take anonymity and distance (for instance) not to be repressions of or fallings off from their more affirmative counterparts but instead affirmative entities in their own right, we might be able to understand restraint and care in terms that can meet, rather than perpetually miss, one another.

A corollary goal of the chapters that follow, then, is to reconsider the affects or emotions that we think of as being politically productive, or usefully harnessed by politically-minded rhetoric. Ecocriticism, environmentalism, and queer theory alike have a long-standing commitment to strong affects, good and bad; this project engages the political possibilities of emotions and tones often thought of as being too quiet or muted to bear any efficacy at all. How can we adopt a quietness that is not quietist? And how might paying attention to the formal characteristics of literary genres typically thought to bear little political relevance (the regionalist sketch, the lyric poem, the prose elegy) help us develop an alternative to the polemical rhetoric so prevalent within the environmental movement today? In turning to the question of tone, we can return to the Wordsworthian dash – which does not preclude or replace an object but instead forestalls its arrival, encouraging us to focus more on the tonality of touch than on its completion or end. Aside from the word “gentle,” however, “Nutting” gives us few clues about how this

touch feels, what it looks like, how its contours might be understood. The pages that follow might be understood as an extended meditation on these questions; by looking to a range of texts from the American nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I suggest, we can begin to understand what is happening in that dash: how the indefinite duration of that pause, of that reaching, might come to constitute a deeply important environmental ethos all its own.

My rethinking of environmental engagement is therefore not simply a matter of affect (and affective language), but also of time; for if we cannot know quite what happens in that “Touch, —” (or quite how it feels), then neither can we know quite how long it lasts. Part of why I emphasize Wordsworth at the outset of this project has to do with the indeterminate temporality of his dash, and of the poetic line more generally. “Touch, —” calls our attention to what happens in these moments of extension or of moving toward, its unquantifiable protraction forcing us to consider the complexities of duration separate from the horizon of event. The contemporary environmental movement, I will argue, tends to have a fixed or rigid relationship to temporality: It locates opportunities for activism and agency in (particular, identifiable, resolvable) “crises.” It counteracts its fear of the future’s many unknowns (which are threatening both in their potentially dangerous contours and in their very unknowability alike) by promoting a belief that we can at least know when the future arrives, concretizing it in the births of the children who collectively constitute “future generations” in whose name we act, restrain, and sustain. It metonymizes catastrophic damage in the form of *representable* apocalyptic events (and *imaginable* post-apocalyptic landscapes). But as environmental thinkers from Rachel Carson to Rob Nixon have emphasized, harm is often invisible, violence is often slow, and damage often is being done long before it becomes legible as such. This project thus is invested in rethinking questions of pace and eventfulness in the canon of American environmental

literature broadly conceived; by turning to texts whose unfolding is no more predictable or quantifiable than is the indeterminate duration of Wordsworth's dash, I provide models for understanding the way that things (intimacies, trust, belonging, damage) slowly, illegibly, and gently burgeon.

As the prevalence of affective vocabulary in this preface already has begun to suggest, in "Nutting" – as throughout this project – questions of environmentality are never far from their interpersonal counterparts; the "wise restraint voluptuous" that promises to reorient us with relation to the natural world seems equally productive and provocative in the context of human relations.⁹ Indeed, queer theory – a field whose emphasis on non-normative desires and pleasures typically locates it within the realm of the "voluptuous" – recently has turned its attention to questions of singleness, loneliness, and solitude – or, in other words, to "wise(?) restraint." Near the close of his essay "Lonely," which advocates that we consider forms of non-relation, singledom, and loneliness amidst the pantheon of "non-majority desires and acts" foundational to queer studies, Michael Cobb writes: "Queer works have brought the controversies of intimacy into close view. Now, as if I'm shifting a car into reverse, I'd like to imagine an aura, or the possibility of being distant from others, at least for a little while. Not a nonrelation per se, but another kind of relation. Sure, such a distance might be just another form of coupledness (the binary – distance vs. intimacy). But at least this couple doesn't promise, right away, that my feelings of disquiet will be relieved by doing what we're all supposed to do: touch!"¹⁰

⁹ This is true, too, in part because of the ways in which despoilment of the natural world is here (as elsewhere) represented as (or implicitly aligned with) the sexual violation of a feminized object. For more on how nature has been gendered over time, see Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: HarperOne, 1990).

¹⁰ Michael Cobb, "Lonely" (*South Atlantic Quarterly* 106.3 [Summer 2007]), 455. Hereafter cited in the text.

If my project lays the groundwork for thinking of distance and intimacy (and relation and nonrelation) in terms other than the binarily opposed, then its emphasis on intransitivity – particularly when considered alongside “Nutting” – also helps us to complicate Cobb’s prevailing discomfort with the imperative to touch. For Cobb’s formulation of the command that he seeks to evade echoes the imperative that concludes Wordsworth’s poem, a resonance which gestures toward the possibility of thinking interpersonal touch beyond or apart from contact. And so perhaps there is a way to harness the affects of Cobb’s (refused) “touch!” while refusing to be bound by its coupling imperative. Perhaps there is a way to love and to care and to remain atmospherically or communally rather than object-orientedly. Perhaps there is an environmental ethic whose patterns lie outside the push and pull of approach and retreat, use and abstinence, investment and distance. Whereas Cobb “[shifts] his car into reverse” in order to begin thinking the forms of distance that he proposes, Wordsworth advocates a kind of vector-less alternative: one that rids itself not of touching but of contact, not of relation but of direction. For without an object to exert a magnetic pull, the directionality of the gesture is not determined in advance – and need not continue on a predictable course once it has been begun. When characters like Sarah Orne Jewett’s environ rather than reach each other, when they look past rather than at one another, when they retain distance at the same time that they cultivate affection, feeling, and warmth, they begin to create a paradigm of relation that fleshes out Wordsworth’s provocatively oblique command. And they do so within a register that pays heed to Cobb’s unwillingness to abandon or relinquish disquiet. Wordsworth’s “Touch —,” like Jewett’s forms of friendship or Henry David Thoreau’s elegiac (un)accounting of his brother’s untimely death or Carson’s meditations on aunting and cancer and ecological futurity, need not be redemptive or compensatory; companionship need not undo loneliness, just as the work of relation need not

eliminate the negative affects that often precede or condition it. “Touch —,” in other words, may not need to be refused but simply rethought.

* * * * *

And why spinsters? With gentle mind/Wait, — for there is an answer in these words.

INTRODUCTION: SPINSTERS, QUEER ECOCRITICISM, AND LITERARY FORM

With the Wordsworthian “Touch, — ” as its starting point, *Spinster Ecology* develops a new form of ecocriticism, one that focuses not on the environmental objects of our relation but on the terms and tonality of that relation itself. In this project’s central texts – by Sarah Orne Jewett, Henry David Thoreau, and Rachel Carson – attention to the natural world is interwoven with attention to a peculiarly reticent form of social engagement, where distance yields a kind of intimacy and anonymity becomes a mode by which people are known. The one-sided, radically asymmetrical relationality that we associate with environmental investment (we engage with the non-human world in ways it cannot directly pay back¹) finds a correlate in the social interactions that populate these texts. Characters are minimally present to one another – and to us – in the works I take up; they appear partially and interact tangentially; they relate to one another across insurmountable distances of time, space, and death. More often than not they linger beside one another atmospherically without revealing much of themselves; the interactions that result matter more for their sheer existence and persistence than for anything particularly profound that happens within them. Attending to such minimal and indirect forms of relationality, I argue, enables us to develop an ecocritical practice that incorporates affective and tonal questions into its set of concerns. These texts’ persistent attention to alternate modes of interpersonal relation – and the persistently muted lexicon in which such relations are represented – is, in other words, not beside the environmental point but instead foundational to it.

In my account, the spinster embodies paradigms of objectless relation at biographical, characterological, stylistic, and narratological levels. And perhaps fittingly, the project takes its

¹ Except perhaps in the form of restraint or inaction – as I elsewhere have discussed with regard to Werner Herzog’s *Grizzly Man*, where Timothy Treadwell’s “proof” of the bears’ love for him is the fact that they refrain from killing him.

title from a context far removed from the familiar nineteenth-century character type: shortly after the publication of *Silent Spring*, former Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson attempted to discredit Rachel Carson by asking “why a spinster with no children was so concerned about genetics.”² Although we may want to dismiss this comment as little more than the sentiments of a misogynist with interests in the chemical industry, Benson’s statement inadvertently gestures toward the limitations of ecocriticism and queer theory, both of which – despite our expectations to the contrary – prove unable to adequately refute his words. Ecocriticism, for reasons I will discuss at length in this introduction, does not always know what to do with a subject whose relationship to stewardship is non-familial, whose relationship to transmission and inheritance is non-biological, whose investment in the future is indirect or otherwise askance. And while queer theory is better equipped to reckon with the non-normative patternings of the spinsterly life, it not only has just begun to engage with the question of the (stereotypically or really) *non-desiring*, but also (particularly in its most recent, most radical incarnations) is far more inclined to refuse the future than to ask how to steward it.³ But the awkward place of the spinster within

² Cited in Linda Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 429. Although Benson’s word is “genetics” and not “future,” the two concepts are fundamentally linked in Carson’s work itself. For instance, she writes: “Some would-be architects of our future look toward a time when it will be possible to alter the human germ plasm by design. But we may easily be doing so now by inadvertence, for many chemicals, like radiation, bring about gene mutations. It is ironic to think that man might determine his own future by something so trivial as the choice of an insect spray” (*Silent Spring* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1996], 8).

³ It perhaps goes without saying that queer theory traditionally has been a field predicated on non-normative desires, sexual practices, and couplings, a predilection that might seem to exclude the spinster. (As Naomi Braun Rosenthal reflects in *Spinster Tales and Womanly Possibilities* [Albany: State U of New York P, 2001], “although there has been an attempt in the radical lesbian community to reclaim the spinster as a heroic figure, that can be accomplished only by ignoring one of the features that once defined her – her habitual sexual abstinence” [4]). However, a recent turn in queer theory has focused on singleness and loneliness themselves; see, in addition to Cobb’s “Lonely,” see Denise Riley’s “The Right to Be Lonely” (in *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect* [Durham & London: Duke U P, 2005]), and Heather Love’s “Gyn/Apology: Sarah Orne Jewett’s Spinster Aesthetics” (*ESQ* 55.3-4 [2009]). My project diverges from these because of its impulse to explore the contours of solitariness and remoteness

both of these discourses ultimately both reveals the need for and aids the development of a queer ecocritical practice. It is by not fitting neatly within either critical paradigm that the spinster can help them begin to speak to one another.

This project thus proceeds by taking Benson's question not as a rhetorical one but rather as a real, grammatical one, by considering what a spinster with no children *can* in fact teach us about genetics – and, by extension, about futurity and relationality themselves. In so doing, it also asks how the spinster's many indirections can contribute to the practice of queer ecocriticism, which recently has been deemed a field “not yet” in existence. As recently as the spring of 2009, Simon Estok could legitimately proclaim that “there has yet to emerge a queer ecocriticism.”⁴ In 2010, Timothy Morton – writing what amounted to a field-defining article in the pages of *PMLA* – could “propose some hypothetical methods and frameworks for a field that doesn't quite exist – queer ecology.”⁵ And the same year, Greg Garrard could suggest that “it is not yet clear what ecocriticism stands to gain from queer theory.”⁶ The fact of this “not yet” is made even more perplexing by virtue of the fact that the subfields that would constitute queer

before immediately leaping to affective judgment about them. (For more on this tendency to forestall judgment, see Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* [Malden & Oxford: Blackwell, 2007], 19.)

⁴ Simon Estok, “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia” (*ISLE* 16.2 [Spring 2009]), 214. Hereafter cited in the text.

⁵ Timothy Morton, “Guest Column: Queer Ecology,” *PMLA* 125.2 (March 2010), 273. Hereafter cited in the text as QE.

⁶ Greg Garrard, “How Queer is Green?” (*Configurations* 18 [2010]), 73. Hereafter cited in the text. At least these three essays grant queer ecocriticism status on the horizon, as a “not yet.” Timothy Clark's *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, published in 2011, engages and addresses many different subfields of ecocriticism – including posthumanism, environmental justice, ecofeminism, green moralism, postcolonialism, science studies, and animal studies – but never once mentions queer theory or queer studies. For other (largely provisional) attempts to reckon with the complexities of queer ecocriticism and ecology, see Karen Barad, “Nature's Queer Performativity” (*Qui Parle* 19.2 [Spring 2011]), Catriona Sandilands, “Unnatural Passions? Toward a Queer Ecology” (*Invisible Culture* 9 [2005]), and Alex Johnson, “How to Queer Ecology: One Goose at a Time” (*Orion* [March/April 2011]). Most of these works, like Garrard's and Morton's, take the two fields' conflicting stances toward the “natural” as the ground of their intervention and inquiry. My project, while not denying the importance of questions of naturalness, locates the fundamental conceptual schisms between the two fields elsewhere.

ecology (or queer ecocriticism – these terms tend to be used relatively interchangeably⁷) already seem to meet in quite organic ways. The general terms used to characterize the two fields often read like odd carbon copies of one another, despite the fact that these critics likely have never engaged with each other’s precise terminology. Donald Worster labels ecology “inescapably a relational discipline speaking a relational language”⁸; Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird similarly insist that “queer is nothing if not relational in its formulations.”⁹ This interdisciplinary echo is itself echoed by Morton’s comment that “ecology...demands intimacies with other beings that queer theory also demands, in another key” (273). And yet Morton stops with that characteristically gestural formulation. *Spinster Ecology* is in part about determining the contours of these “keys.” How might we make the two fields meet harmoniously? Or, alternatively, how might we develop an ear for – and a productive engagement with – the kind of dissonance they produce when they overlap?

To respond to these questions, we must begin by determining the reasons for the “not yet,” and considering why two fields that have been well established for decades have not yet met in a consistent or productive way.¹⁰ One impediment, I want to suggest, involves the

⁷ By mentioning this in a parenthetical, I do not mean to dismiss the importance of the question of terminology, but rather to gesture toward the fact that it is an ongoing challenge, one that this project will not be able to resolve.

⁸ Donald Worster, *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1985), 318. Hereafter cited in the text.

⁹ Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird, “Introduction,” *Queering the Non/Human* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008), 5. Hereafter cited in the text.

¹⁰ Morton’s article opens with a statement so broad as to leave even those versed in the field scratching their heads: “Ecological criticism and queer theory seem incompatible, but if they met, there would be a fantastic explosion. How shall we accomplish this perverse, Frankensteinian meme splice?” Morton’s language also resonates directly with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s. In his *Queer Ecology* piece, amidst a discussion of the fundamental antiessentialism of evolution theory, he argues that “life-forms constitute a *mesh*, a nontotalizable, open-ended concatenation of interrelations that blur and confound boundaries at practically any level: between species, between the living and the nonliving, between organism and environment” (275-276, emphasis in the original). Such blurring and confounding of boundaries is, he means to suggest, fundamentally queer; indeed, in the posthumously published “Thinking Through Queer

conflicting positions that practitioners of the two fields take relative to their objects of study. Ecocriticism – like environmentalism – tends to be fundamentally conservative, a term I mean not politically but rather structurally. Whatever radical aims and predilections its practitioners may have, the field is necessarily concerned with *preserving* the environment, in *sustaining* a present state into a future time. Although ecocritics may be invested in showing how normative behaviors (or a commitment to normative political or economic paradigms) have been partially responsible for causing environmental damage, they are also invested in establishing (or enforcing) ethical and behavioral norms that can be maintained into an “indefinite future.”¹¹ Much ecocriticism, like much nature writing, consequently comes to feel like a praisesong, committed as it is to demonstrating value in order to engender stewardship and care.

Queer theory, by contrast, is at its core a disruptive discourse, perpetually seeking to challenge norms and undermine the status quo. In the introduction to their recent anthology *Queering the Non/Human*, for instance, Hird and Giffney take up the proliferating meanings of their central term:

The unremitting emphasis in queer theoretical work on fluidity, uber-inclusivity, indeterminacy, indefinability, unknowability, the preposterous, impossibility, unthinkability, unintelligibility, meaninglessness and that which is unrepresentable is an attempt to undo normative entanglements and fashion alternative imaginaries.... If this book is concerned with queering the non/human, it is also about submitting the ‘queer’ in queerness/queering/queer theory/queer studies to examination.... Queer functions

Theory,” Sedgwick similarly suggests that “queer” refers to “the open *mesh* of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses, and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, or anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (*The Weather in Proust* [Durham & London: Duke U P, 2011], 199-200, emphasis mine).

¹¹ For much more on the vexed question of just what “sustainability” seeks to sustain – a topic often tied to an amorphous (and potentially normative) idea of the “common good” – see the essays collected in *Fairness and Futurity: Essays on Environmental Sustainability and Social Justice*, ed. Andrew Dobson (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1999), particularly the contributions by Brian Barry, who argues that the “core concept of sustainability is...that there is some X whose value should be maintained, in as far as it lies in our power to do so, into the indefinite future. This leaves it open for dispute what the content of X should be” (101), and Bryan Norton, who insists that “some obligations to future generations exist, and the task accepted is to clarify and explain these obligations” (118).

variously for the contributors as an interpellating gesture that calls on them to resist, reclaim, invent, oppose, defy, make trouble for, open up, enrich, facilitate, disturb, produce, undermine, expose, make visible, critique, reveal, move beyond, transgress, subvert, unsettle, challenge, celebrate, interrogate, counter, provoke, and rebel. These are their words. While a good many of the aforementioned terms could be collapsed into a shorter, more seemly and manageable list, we have chosen not to do this as queer is anything but seemly or manageable. This, for us, is one of the refreshing if sometimes frustrating facets of queer – practitioners’ outright refusal to form a consensus around vocabulary or rules of usage. (4-5)

Unsurprisingly, the verbs invoked to label the functionality of “queer” are uniformly transitive; “queering” is something that we do *to* an object, *to* a process, *to* an ideology. As a result, “queer” – like the object or being *queered* – is always in a reactive relationship to mainstream normativity, never getting the chance to set its own terms.¹² This insistently cancelling thrust might help us account for the failure of queer ecocriticism to take hold. For ecocriticism – because of its political alignment with environmentalism – tends to think of itself as imperiled in ways that queer theory’s disruptive aims only exacerbate. As Morton says, anticipating critiques of his project in *Ecology Without Nature*, “[f]rom an environmentalist point of view, this is not a good time. So why undertake a project that criticizes ecocriticism at all? Why not just let sleeping ecological issues lie?”¹³ Although juxtaposing “ecocriticism” with “queer” (either as verb or as adjective) need not automatically imply a challenge to the former, it’s safe to say that

¹² For many, this has been an affirmative hallmark and point of pride of queer theory; Thomas Dowson, for instance, insists: “Queer theory does not provide a positivity, rather it is a way of producing reflection, a way of taking a stand *vis a vis* the authoritative standard” (2000, 163, cited in Giffney & O’Rourke 2). Likewise, David Halperin insists that “‘queer’ does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant.. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers” (1995, 62, cited in Giffney & O’Rourke 3). Although I appreciate the importance of challenging norms and normativity, queer theory strikes me as hamstrung by this unavoidable transitivity and reactivity alike. I am apparently not the only one to feel this way; some queer theorists who have long been committed to an anti-normative, oppositional stance have recently been engaging in important self-critiques. I think particularly here of “Sociality and Sexuality” (Critical Inquiry 26.4 [Summer, 2000]), where Leo Bersani rethinks the terms of the antisocial turn that his earlier work helped to inaugurate.

¹³ Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 2007). Hereafter cited in the text as EWN.

a gesture which seeks to resist, reclaim, invent, oppose, defy, make trouble for, disturb, undermine, expose, critique, or move beyond might not be entirely welcome in – or readily incorporated into – the ecocritical conversation.

Future Generations

If this explanation for the “not yet” of queer ecocritical practice involves a methodological incompatibility, then other explanations are related to the philosophical or theoretical differences between the two camps. One foundational split between the fields comes at the juncture where we (via Ezra Taft Benson) began: the question of futurity. In his 1972 book *Homosexual Desire*, considered by some to be the inaugural work of queer theory, Guy Hocquenghem argued that “[t]he gay movement is related to the ungenerating-ungenerated of the orphan desire, and is unaware of the passing of generations as stages on the road to better living. It knows nothing about ‘sacrifice now for the sake of future generations.’”¹⁴ Although Hocquenghem labels that latter tagline as a “cornerstone of socialist enlightenment,” it also echoes in our contemporary ears as the cornerstone of American environmentalist rhetoric, which concretizes the future in the form of the child and metonymizes stewardship in the form of saving the planet for “future generations.” Contemporary environmentalism, especially given the recent emphasis on sustainability, tends to be future-oriented, its rhetoric predicated on matters of inheritance and procreation alike. Even (or perhaps especially) those thinkers who consider themselves “liberal” in their politics and “inclusive” in their values rely on such commonplaces; in her most recent book, for instance, Sandra Steingraber – who has been deemed “the new

¹⁴ Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire* (Durham & London: Duke U P, 1993), 147. Hereafter cited in the text.

Rachel Carson”¹⁵ – claims, with utter earnestness, that “[u]ltimately, the environmental crisis is a parenting crisis.”¹⁶ A popular environmentalist slogan asks, “What will your children breathe?” A proverb widely invoked across the environmental movement insists that “We do not inherit the earth from our grandparents. We borrow it from our children.” The Brundtland Commission Report officially defined sustainable development as that which “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”¹⁷ The retailer Tiny Planet sells shirts for infants emblazoned with environmentally-themed slogans; one proclaims, triumphantly, “I AM THE FUTURE,” while another urges, in bold letters, “DRIVE A HYBRID,” accompanied by future-oriented mandate: “Save some green for me.” This generational rhetoric, moreover, is not limited to traditionally “green” constituencies; in 2011, a commercial began popping up – most frequently during sporting events – for a new motor oil made up of 50% recycled materials: Valvoline’s NextGen. The spot opens with a grandfatherly salesman standing behind the counter of an auto supply store. “Just because I’m a car guy,” he says, “doesn’t mean I don’t care about the environment.” Ten seconds later, a Valvoline Oil Change employee insists, “I also care about doing things right...,” before NASCAR driver Carl Edwards finishes his sentence: “...and what I’m leaving behind – for the next car guy.” What interests me here is less the greenwashing of America – a topic that others have tackled with

¹⁵ A 1999 profile of Steingraber in *Sierra* Magazine deemed her “the heir to Rachel Carson,” and many readers and critics since have adopted variations on the moniker. (See Liza Gross, “Rachel’s Daughter: Sandra Steingraber breaks the silence about cancer’s environmental links” [*Sierra* (September/October 1999)].)

¹⁶ Sandra Steingraber, *Raising Elijah: Protecting Our Children in an Age of Environmental Crisis* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2011), 281. Hereafter cited in the text.

¹⁷ The Brundtland Report, published in 1987 by Oxford University Press under the title *Our Common Future*, is the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, convened by the United Nations in 1983. The full text of the report is available at <www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm>

insight and aplomb¹⁸ – than the way in which the rhetoric of future generations has made its way so firmly into mainstream capitalist and activist culture alike. Environmental stewardship becomes the province of parents and nuclear families. The face of environmental victimization and planetary health – the face that constitutes the reason for our care and our attention (even if we’re “car guys”) – is that of the (biological) child.¹⁹

The importance both of children and of normative developmental temporality in environmental rhetoric becomes even clearer in advertising campaigns more directly predicated on affective appeals. For many environmentally-themed advertisements (both those produced by companies seeking to harness our purchasing power and advocacy organizations seeking a slightly different form of support) make their claims by appealing to the emotions that the child’s vulnerability engenders; in these campaigns, it is the newborn baby or the unborn child in whom we are to locate our hopes and fears alike. In the late fall of 2011, for instance, a Sierra Club advertising campaign began to appear on the Washington, DC Metro. Picturing a series of pregnant bellies, the advertisements warned commuters about the danger that mercury pollution from coal-fired power plants poses to unborn children.

¹⁸ For more on this, see Jed Greer and Kenny Bruno, *Greenwash: The Reality Behind Corporate Environmentalism* (Lanham: Apex Press, 1997) and Brian Tokar, *Earth for Sale: Reclaiming Ecology in an Age of Corporate Greenwash* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1999).

¹⁹ For more on our political, social, and cultural investment in the innocence of childhood, see Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child; or, Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke U P, 2005). This rhetoric of origins perhaps raises the question of the hopes attached to birth and youth – and the related question of whether one can be born a spinster. Although we think of that as a term applied only to old women, and only somewhat reluctantly (or critically), nineteenth century regionalist fiction also at times presents spinsterliness as a state to be aspired to. In Rose Terry Cooke’s “How Celia Changed Her Mind,” for instance, the titular protagonist – after coming to terms with her own status as an “Old Maid” – begins hosting a Thanksgiving dinner for old maids, and, at the end of the story, is cast as the progenitor of other spinsters. She says: “ ‘now I can I’m goin’ to adopt Rosy Barker’s two children, and fetch ‘em up to be dyed-in-the-wool old maids; and every year, so long as I live, I’m goin’ to keep an old maids’ Thanksgivin’ for a kind of burnt-offering, sech as the Bible tells about, for I’ve changed my mind clear down to the bottom.’ ”

Although the common text at the bottom of all of the advertisements explains that “Mercury poisoning from our nation’s coal-burning power plants is harming pregnant women and their unborn children,” the imagery appeals solely to our concern for the latter; the women are not pictured as whole bodies, but rather metonymized as bellies, and arrows pointing to those bellies play with variations on the celebratory language customarily attached to birth. “This little bundle of joy is now a reservoir of mercury,” proclaims one. “She’s going to be so full of joy, love, smiles, and mercury,” warns another. Indeed, the rest of the text leaves concern for the mother behind entirely: “Mercury is a powerful neurotoxin that can damage the brain and nervous system – causing developmental problems and learning disabilities.” This claim, as Sandra Steingraber and others have demonstrated with copious scientific evidence, is both deeply important and undeniably true. But the appeal here is not scientific but affective; those of us on the subway – men, women, parents, parents-to-be, childless, uncoupled, queer – are all expected to respond to the pull of the pregnant belly, to the future-oriented rhetoric in the arrows, to the sense of hope and promise and normative development that mercury toxicity threatens to undermine.

Or perhaps those of us who are childless are not expected to respond. This seems to be one implication of the marketing of Horizon Organic milk, whose carton pictures a series of children and the claim “At Horizon, we care about families. After all, we’re parents, too!” Once again relying on the affective appeal of the child, and once again subordinating the health of adults to the health of children (although the box’s rhetoric proclaims that “DHA may make a big difference for kids and adults alike,” imagery of children rules the day; we are supposed to

celebrate that Horizon uses “the same DHA used in 97% of US infant formula”²⁰), Horizon’s logic feels more exclusionary than the Sierra Club’s, implying, as it does, that parenting is the privileged locus of care, that the only way to be invested in futures and families (which are, of course, two separate things) is to be a parent oneself.²¹

²⁰ My choice to focus on the rhetoric of the milk carton is far from arbitrary; milk has been a flashpoint in discussions of environmental health and toxicity since the publication of *Silent Spring*. In that book’s “Elixirs of Death” chapter, for instance, Carson strategically interweaves the hope placed in birth with the fear associated with poisoning and death: “The poison [DDT] may also be passed on from mother to offspring. Insecticide residues have been recovered from human milk in samples tested by Food and Drug Administration scientists. This means that the breast-fed human infant is receiving small but regular additions to the load of toxic chemicals building up in his body. It is by no means his first exposure, however: there is good reason to believe this begins while he is still in the womb” (23). The (haunting) fact that what biological mothers pass to children may be not only genes and hopes but also toxins has since become a commonplace in environmental writing. In *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Landscape Wars of the American West* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: U of California P, 1999), whose first half takes up (among other topics) questions of toxicity at the Nevada Test Site, Rebecca Solnit emphasizes the material and emotional consequences of chemical exposure in similar terms: “Strontium-90, a radioactive isotope in fallout, first became a public issue in 1955. An element that the body mistakes for calcium, it concentrates in milk and then in the bones of milk drinkers, particularly the growing bones of children. It was showing up in the milk of nursing mothers, as well as cow’s milk.... Milk is no ordinary thing to fear. It is the essence of the bond between a mother and her child, a substance at once innocent, erotic, and essential.... If a mother can’t tell if her own milk will strengthen or poison her child, then the most primary bonds have been ruptured, the most intimate acts contaminated, and the entire future called into question. To have a child is to reach into the future, an act of faith in the continuity of things; and the strontium-90 in cows’ and mothers’ milk sabotaged even this” (97).

²¹ More troubling still may be the question – which may seem to lie beyond the confines of this project’s concerns, but is nonetheless central to its ethics – of why the children in these advertisements are, unfailingly, white. In this, the Sierra Club campaign has a leg up; at least one of the versions of the advertisement that appeared on the DC Metro featured a pregnant African-American woman. But as I cycle through my mind the hundreds of environmentally-minded advertisements featuring children that I have attended to over the years, I am hard pressed to think of a single one that foregrounds a child of color. Although it is beyond the scope of this project to draw connections between queerness/spinsterliness and questions of American race/racialization, several recent works of queer theory have done just that. In *Anachronism and Its Others: Sexuality, Race, Temporality* (Albany: State U of New York P, 2009), Valerie Rohy links sexological discourse and scientific racism, drawing connections between the perception of homosexuals as backward or “archaic” and of Africans and African-Americans as primitive; her chapter on Jewett and Willa Cather argues that “the backwardness of local color [like, later, of Cather’s Sapphira] is essential to the nationalist project, if only as a figure for the abject – for what must be summoned into national consciousness in order to be disavowed in favor of progress, fertility, and futurity” (59). In *Making Girls into Women: American Women’s Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity* (Durham & London: Duke U P, 2003), Kathryn Kent argues not only for an analogous relationship between racial and sexual “others” but also for a possible alliance between them:

By calling attention to the underlying presumptions of these advertisements, I do not in any way mean to suggest that we should ignore the threat of mercury poisoning, nor to challenge the claim that children are physiologically more susceptible than the rest of us to whatever enters their body, good or bad. Nor do I mean, of course, to discredit or devalue the hope that parents *do* place in their children's future, or to suggest in any way that our posture ought to be one of disregard. However, insofar as these advertisements identify the future with the babies in those bellies or the infants consuming this milk, associate environmentalism with biological reproduction, and make stewardship the province of parents, I take them as exemplary of the rhetoric and social stance that Lee Edelman so forcefully condemns in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, one of the most influential works in queer theory's so-called antisocial turn. At the start of his book, discussing the appearance of then-President Bill Clinton in a 1997 television spot sponsored by the Coalition for America's Children, Edelman argues:

[W]hat helped [Clinton] most in these public appeals on behalf of America's children was the social consensus that such an appeal is impossible to refuse. Indeed, though these

In being "useless" because of her marginal relation to domestic labor, and "unnatural" because she does not have children, the spinster may represent the site of queer or protolesbian possibilities in nineteenth-century U.S. culture. In signifying the boundaries of what counts both as acceptable forms of female "work" and as "natural" forms of maternity, she mediates between the public and private, the market and domestic sphere, the middle and working class, and in some cases the lines of racist division between white subjectivities and those marked as racially or ethnically "other." Thus, we may see the spinster as categorized with and therefore allied with people of color. (41)

These parallels drawn, it is important to acknowledge that the category of "spinster" in the nineteenth century more often referred to white women than to women of color. As Hortense Spillers explains, marriage – and the entry it provided into the public sphere – was too valuable and necessary a political resource for post-Civil War African-American women to willingly relinquish ("Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," *Power and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (London: Pandora Press, 1984), cited in Kent, 21-22). Although the spinsters I address are exclusively white, I do not think that spinster ecology as a paradigm need exclude women of color. In fact, developing an environmental(ist) ethic that takes as its foundation alternative relational and familial paradigms may help the environmental movement to better take heed and incorporate the perspectives of populations whose cultural practices incorporate multigenerational households and more expansive, less nuclear and normative definitions of family.

public service announcements concluded with the sort of rhetorical flourish associated with hard-fought political campaigns (“We’re fighting for the children. Whose side are you on?”), that rhetoric was intended to avow that this issue, like an ideological Mobius strip, only *permitted* one side. Such “self-evident” one-sidedness – the affirmation of a value so unquestioned, because so obviously unquestionable, as that of the Child whose innocence solicits our defense – is precisely, of course, what distinguishes public service announcements from the partisan discourse of political argumentation. But it is also, I suggest, what makes such announcements so oppressively political – political not in the partisan terms implied by the media consultant, but political in a far more insidious way: political insofar as the fantasy subtending the image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought. That logic compels us, to the extent that we would register as politically responsible, to submit to the framing of political debate – and, indeed, of the political field – as defined by the terms of what this book describes as reproductive futurism: terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations.²²

In my third chapter, I will engage at length with Edelman’s work and stake a claim (however gently) in this debate; for now, I want mainly to foreground the queer theoretical resistance to rhetoric and imagery central – and often taken for granted – within the environmental movement.²³ While I am not ready to adopt Edelman’s “simple provocation... that *queerness*

²² Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham & London: Duke U P, 2003), 2. Hereafter cited in the text.

²³ Although I am emphasizing here the tension between an insistently reproductive temporality and a queer (non-)politics that attempts to refuse or undo/corrode reproductive futurism, this is not the only point of temporal friction between environmentalism and queer theory. Another difference has to do with the question of whether temporal unfolding is understood to be continuous or fundamentally fractured. The reproductive or inheritance model privileged by environmentalists emphasizes transmission and continuity; parents pass the planet (genes, knowledge, care) to children, who then pass it to their children, and so on. (This is tied, of course, to the emphasis on sustaining and preserving and maintenance discussed above.) Queer temporal models, whether or not they are as radical and as fracturing as Edelman’s “no futurism,” tend to emphasize queer time as a radical rupture of the norm. (As Christopher Looby and Christopher Castiglia write, “queer theory...privilege[s] temporal disjuncture and play rather than historical continuity” (195).) Even utopic queer futurists like José Esteban Muñoz understand their models to unfold in a mode radically heterogeneous to those instantiated in normative time. (See Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* [New York: New York U P, 2009].) My investment in this project will be to think through models of queer time whose forms of immanence and (non-historical, non-linear) continuity potentially make them compatible with a rethought environmental(ist) temporality. In this, my aims dovetail with Michael D. Snediker’s work in *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2009),

names the side of those *not* ‘fighting for the children’” (3), I do think it important to acknowledge the possibility that our unquestioned privileging of the child in environmental(ist) discourse makes some aspects of stewardship – and some fundamentally ethical modes of engagement – “unthinkable.” For the normative presumptions upon which the Sierra Club campaign rests include not only that biological parents dwell at the center of environmental advocacy, and not only that children (unborn and born alike) are the focus of our stewardship efforts, but also that the temporality of such stewardship is linear, vertical (or, more specifically, intergenerational), and predicable. The hyper-visibility of the pregnant body calls attention both to a normative developmental temporality and to visibility as such; as numerous environmental activists and ecocritics have demonstrated, however, and as this project will similarly attempt to elucidate, environmental harm and benefit alike often inhere long before their effects become legible, and the temporality of such happenings is more often recursive and unpredictable than it is linear or direct. By reifying origins and beginnings, environmental rhetoric too often overlooks lifespans (and those who exist at various moments within them). By emphasizing discrete events, like pregnancy and birth, it too often undervalues the importance of duration. As my third chapter will argue in much more detail, both the environmentalist’s alignment of the future with the child and the antisocial queer theorist’s imperative to reject the future, the child, and reproductivity themselves oversimplify environmental (and political) temporality, leaving us not only without the grounding for a queer environmentalism but also with a model of

which develops a theory of non-optative optimism, of an optimism that, “embedded in its own immanent present, might be *interesting*” (2).

environmentality itself that is simplified or caricatured for the sake of eliciting activist engagement and political support.²⁴

When environmentalism does expand the temporal terms of its gaze, it does so in order to include not non-normative relational paradigms but rather additional generations within the same linear patterns of transmission and inheritance. A recent advertisement for The Nature Conservancy, for instance, pictures a pristine natural area overlaid with a straightforward imperative: “Tear this page out and save it for your grandchildren.” Similarly, Kathleen Dean Moore and Michael P. Nelson’s collection *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril* concludes a section on saving the planet for future generations by insisting, simply, that “it’s time for a frank talk with grandparents.”²⁵ James E. Hansen’s recent book about climate change

²⁴ For more on how the content of political activism intersects with its rhetorical forms, see my discussion of the polemic in chapter 3.

²⁵ Kathleen Dean Moore and Michael P. Nelson, eds., *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril* (San Antonio: Trinity U P, 2010), 65. Hereafter cited in the text. Although I find some aspects of this turn to grandparents encouraging – in particular, the attention it pays to the possible environmental investments of the elderly (and, by extension, possibly the aging and the ill as well) and its (ever so gentle, ever so minimal) disruption of the hegemony of the nuclear family within environmentalism, I can’t help but think that it ends up rubbing salt in the wound of the queer environmental subject. For if we’re willing to accept as an important truth of society that not everyone will be a parent – whether due to choice or to circumstance – then we must also accept that even fewer people will be grandparents. And if we’re willing to accept that the rhetoric of “future generations” threatens to either disenfranchise or let off the hook those – the happily childless, the unhappily childless, the currently childless, the queer – whose relationship to reproductive futurity is askance at best, then we must also acknowledge that the emphasis on grandparenting – which requires two consecutive generations to choose to raise children – threatens to do the same to an even greater population. Indeed, as those of us who have come out to our (liberal, accepting) parents know, the grief attached to a gay child is often related to a parent’s fear of never becoming a grandparent. For becoming a grandparent – often a deeply felt wish of those parents of grown children – is not a simple matter of agency. Whether or not we decide to become parents is not within our own parents’ control. In Kath Weston’s words, “Before the lesbian baby boom received widespread media coverage, the most common parental reaction when someone came out was to assume that having a gay son or daughter meant giving up any hope of grandchildren” (*Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* [New York: Columbia U P, 1991], 187). For more on this, see the section of Sara Ahmed’s article “Happiness and Queer Politics” entitled “Making Others Happy” (world picture 3 [summer 2009], www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_3/Ahmed.html).

is titled *Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth About the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity*.²⁶ This is simply a sampling; the list could go on and on.²⁷

I have presented this series of advertisements and anecdotes as much simply to juxtapose them as to analyze them; my point is less what we make of them than how – and how ubiquitously – they appear to us. I have had to learn to attune myself to the prevalence of such rhetoric; so accustomed am I to it – so taken for granted has it become – that otherwise it would simply pass me by. But looking at the pregnant bellies and the blonde-haired, blue-eyed milk drinkers and the toddler apparel proclaiming – and claiming – futurity, picturing in my head a slideshow of all the other such incarnations of reproductive rhetoric that I have come across in recent years, it seems easy to understand why Edelman has pronounced the project of a queer environmentalism impossible.²⁸ And we need not be Lee Edelman – or agree with his characterization of queerness – to feel uncomfortable. Picture Rachel Carson on the Washington Metro, perhaps on her way to a Senate hearing. Picture Henry David Thoreau walking by a

²⁶ James E. Hansen, *Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth About the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2009).

²⁷ Given their fundamentally opposed stances toward the question of futurity, it's perhaps not surprising that queer theory and ecocriticism have quite different approaches to their own intellectual or conceptual horizons; whereas Buell – perhaps the central arbiter of the state of ecocriticism – can publish a volume titled, simply, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Janet Halley and Andrew Parker must couch their similar collection in more tentative terms (*After Sex? On Writing Since Queer Theory*), deeply aware as they are that the positing of a linear, predictable, potentially reified path toward the future runs counter to much of the most influential work in recent queer theory – particularly by the practitioners in its antisocial camp.

²⁸ This statement of Edelman's is unpublished (at least to the best of my knowledge), but was given as a response to questions posed to him at a talk at the University of Wisconsin-Madison following the publication of *No Future*. Edelman is not alone in this skepticism, even if he has been the most explicit about naming environmentalism as queer theory's (most?) impossible bedfellow. In *Homos*, Leo Bersani wonders whether “given the rage for respectability so visible in gay life today, some useful friction – and as a result some useful thought – may be created by questioning the compatibility of homosexuality with civic service” (*Homos* [Cambridge & London: Harvard U P, 1995], 113). That his question “Should a homosexual be a good citizen?” (113) may have implications for environmental citizenship is perhaps made clearest earlier on in the book, when he argues that the gay community's assimilative tendencies (the push for gay marriage, for instance) “[reveal] political ambitions about as stirring as those reflected on the bumper stickers that enjoin us to ‘think globally’ and ‘act locally’” (6).

window on Newbury Street, passing a display of Tiny Planet clothes. Picture Sarah Orne Jewett at a general store in South Berwick, picking up a carton of Horizon Organic milk. “This little bundle of joy”? “I am the future”? “We’re parents too”? How do such slogans (and their associated images) look to spinsterly eyes?

Part of the issue here, of course, is where environmentalism’s emphasis on future generations leaves those – the queer, the happily childless, the infertile, the unattached, the spinster – who are unlikely to have biological children of their own and who may – for reasons theoretical, personal, and political alike – resist our rhetoric’s tendency to concretize the future in the form of the child. And so too we might find ourselves wondering where environmentalism positions those – the elderly, the AIDS patient, the terminally ill, the spinster – who seem to be living with “no future” of their own. And yet the issue need not be quite so identitarian, or quite so “special interest” in nature. For where does this rhetoric – with its emphasis on the predictability of the future (both insofar as we are able to recognize the future when it arrives, and insofar as we hope for a future that resembles the present as the child resembles the parent) – leave any of us? How does it position us in the face of utter unpredictability, of surprises both gentle and catastrophic, of changes that unfold at a pace radically different than that of (inter)generational time? Where does it leave our knowledge – and our desire for political action in the face of the fact – that the immediate victims of existing environmental calamities are often adults (indeed, often laboring adults) living in the here and now, not children yet to be born?²⁹

²⁹ Such questions tend to be consigned to the field of environmental justice rather than woven through mainstream ecocriticism. I will engage at greater length later in this introduction with the recent writings of Rob Nixon, who works at the intersection of postcolonial ecocriticism and environmental justice; see also Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, eds., *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, & Pedagogy* (Tucson: U of Arizona P, 2002) and Giovanna DiChiro, “Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice,” in William Cronon, ed., *Common Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996).

And when deeply important, ethically complicated tasks – like the stewardship of the planet – are left to the nuclear family, what happens to our sense of collective responsibility and communal identity alike? The spinster, I will argue, does not *take a side* in this debate, but instead dwells *to the side* of it, thus providing us with an alternative model of temporality and investment, one that neither simply adheres to nor simply negates either camp's terms.

(No) Limits

In some respects, casting the discussion above as a question of the future is a red herring, for the imperatives performed and implied by such advertising campaigns appeal to the future largely in order to condition our behavior in the here and now. As Hocquenghem's statement on queerness already has reminded us, an emphasis on future generations often becomes an imperative to present-day asceticism; indeed, contemporary environmentalism often inscribes a command to limit our present-day desires (or, more properly, to limit our present-day pleasures) for the sake of those yet to come. In this formulation appears the kernel of the second central challenge to developing a queer ecocriticism: the status of desire within the two theoretical/critical fields. As Andrew Ross pithily suggests, "[u]nlike other new social movements, ecology is commonly perceived as the one that says no, the antipleasure voice that says you're never gonna get it, so get used to going without."³⁰ Or, in Greg Garrard's slightly more measured words, "environmentalism is generally perceived as a politics of self-denial rather than liberation."³¹ Environmentalism is often understood to be predicated on forms of restraint and inaction (in keeping with imperatives like "leave no trace," or "take only pictures,

³⁰ Andrew Ross, *The Chicago Gangster Way of Life: Nature's Debt to Society* (London & New York: Verso, 1994), 268. Hereafter cited in the text.

³¹ Greg Garrard, "Ecocriticism and Education for Sustainability" (*Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* 7.3 [Fall 2007]), 360.

leave only footprints,” our stature as environmentalists is often based on what we do not do), which seemingly leaves little room for forces like desire and sensations like pleasure – except, of course, to the extent that both are denied. In her Foucauldian reading of environmental issues, Catriona Sandilands expands on this generalization:

[M]uch contemporary environmentalism relies on a discourse of self-limitation and self-denial. This discourse is omnipresent; it is apparent in everything from the ‘voluntary simplicity’ of deep ecologists to industrialized nations’ (hypocritical) calls, via the normative prescriptions of international eco-regimes, for ‘Third World’ governments to exercise self-restraint in their ‘unruly’, ecologically destructive aspirations. The point, it seems, is to produce both individuals and nations as responsible eco-subjects, not by overt repression or regulation, but by the invocation of a notion of ‘the common good’ in which ‘limit’ is the primary discursive term around which people are to organize their ecological practices, self-concepts, and pleasures.³²

Whereas Sandilands’s discussion focuses in particular on the kinds of “unruly bodies” and practices that are regulated within contemporary environmentalism’s pervasive “population discourse” (86, 90) – a topic that the essays in the recent *Queer Ecologies* volume that she edited take up as well³³ – her analysis is more broadly applicable to the mainstream environmental movement writ large. For a major part of the environmentalist ethos is to make do with less: to reduce our consumption, to limit our desires, to forego what we might so deeply want.³⁴ My aim

³² Catriona Sandilands, “Sex at the Limits,” *Discourse of the Environment*, ed. Èric Darier (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 80-81. Hereafter cited in the text.

³³ See in particular Andil Gosine, “Non-white Reproduction and Same-Sex Eroticism: Queer Acts against Nature,” *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, eds. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana U P, 2010), 149-172. For more on the status of population regulation – and on queer ecocriticism’s odd attraction to neo-Malthusian discourse, see the middle section of my Chapter Three.

³⁴ And this language of limits, of course, is not separate from the questions of temporality discussed above. Not only are we often told to limit our present consumption and waste for the sake of “future generations,” but the temporality involved in the very idea of limits themselves is often inescapably linear. As Ross points out, the rhetoric of self-denial necessarily assumes that time unfolds linearly and predictably: “a ...problem...lies within our conceptual understanding of ‘limits’ themselves. Limits, whenever they are invoked, call to mind either a mechanical system with a restricted capacity for production or distribution, or some finite quantity of mechanical resources. Yet neither of these is an adequate representation of the dynamic interplay between human societies and the natural world. More

in bringing this rhetoric to the fore is not to encourage waste or use, but rather to point out the extent to which the language of self-denial and self-deprivation so deeply ingrained in environmentalism conflict – potentially violently – with the rhetoric of queer theory (and LGBT studies), which is so foundationally concerned with desires and their free expression.

Indeed, much of the more radical work in queer theory is invested precisely in violating limits, invested as they so often are in maintaining certain norms (which, in the environmentalist context, are typically painted in the colors of the “common good”). When Lee Edelman insists that “the fate of the queer is to figure the fate that cuts the thread of futurity,” this is the case in part because “the jouissance, the corrosive enjoyment, intrinsic to queer (non)identity annihilates the fetishistic jouissance that works to *consolidate* identity by allowing reality to coagulate around its ritual reproduction” (30). And Leo Bersani’s early and deeply influential work “want[s]...to propose – as I think Foucault meant to – that the intolerable promise of ‘unforeseen kinds of relationships’ which many people see in gay lifestyles cannot be dissociated from an authentically new organization of the body’s pleasures; and to suggest that such a program may necessarily involve some radical, perhaps even dangerous, experimentation with modes of what used to be called making love.”³⁵ Or, perhaps most radically, the practice of barebacking, as Tim Dean explains in his work on queer subculture, is invested in “[r]epudiating limits ...[and] challenging to the point of dissolution an individual’s boundaries, in order to achieve boundlessness.”³⁶ Once again, the practices related to queerness and queer identity – like the verb “queer” itself – are fundamentally disruptive; “dangerous” and “corrosive,” their investment

constraining yet is the suggestion of encountering limits or confines on a linear path, along which route we are then obliged to withdraw” (267-268).

³⁵ Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1995), 80-81. Hereafter cited in the text.

³⁶ Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009), 46. Hereafter cited in the text.

in bodily pleasures promises to reorganize (or perhaps disorganize) the social order precisely by “annihilat[ing]” normativity itself.

I am far from the first to notice this conflict between the fields; it was in her own early work of speculative queer ecocriticism, for instance, that Greta Gaard proclaimed the environmental movement’s deep “erotophobia.” And Andrew Ross insists that “[p]eople respond better to a call for social fulfillment than to a summons of physical deprivation, and that is why any social movement that uses self-denial as a vehicle for inducing change is as pathetic as one that uses apocalyptic threats or appeals to Mother Nature’s vengeance” (268), a sentiment with which I mostly agree (at least in theory), even if I would not go so far as to call such impulses “pathetic.” But then he goes on to assert, speculatively, in the final pages of his book, that we need a “world where individual gratification is intensified, and not determined, by concerns of common environmental well-being; ...where hedonism has replaced asceticism as the dominant mode of green conduct” (272-273). It is not entirely clear what it would mean to practice a green hedonism; likewise, when Sandilands suggests that because for “environmentalism...to go beyond ‘just saying no,’ ... spaces for exploration must be allowed to flourish and proliferate” and, relatedly, that “[p]olymorphous sexualities and multiple natures are ... at the heart of green resistances” (93), it’s not clear how these approaches would actually play out in practice.³⁷ In other words, although we might like to imagine an environmentalism where we “just say yes,” neither Ross nor Sandilands gives us a model to follow in order to make this approach an ethically viable reality.

³⁷ Indeed, in the midst of these assertions, Sandilands returns to that problematic queer theoretical commonplace, calling for disruption – that transitive “queering” – as if it were an end in itself: “Where population control,” she says, “fails to free humans and non-humans alike from normative constraints, self-questioning and disruption may be more promising” (93).

Clearly, then, it is not enough simply to “queer” the environmental movement. Advocating that we replace asceticism with hedonism is not likely to go over well with those invested in common planetary futures; likewise, critiquing the normative biases of environmental rhetoric or refusing the tenets of reproductive futurism so foundational to it are strictly negative gestures - ideologically important, certainly, but ultimately empty materially. In other words: when a queer theorist like Edelman says “fuck” to the future (29) or a queer ecocritic like Jill E. Anderson, attempting to endorse Edelman while also advocate for the planet, suggests, somewhat nonsensically, that (due to problems of overpopulation) “[r]eproductive sex is, essentially, the end of mankind,”³⁸ they leave those of us invested in the question of planetary futures (which by definition require reproduction in some way, shape, or form) with little ground on which to stand. And so this dissertation seeks not only to critique but also to develop alternative paradigms, to use the literary texts it has at hand to re-envision answers to the questions posited above. And in so doing, this project also dares to “green” the queer – to challenge the field to be more open to those realms (like futurity) that it prefers to critique, rupture, or dismiss, to ask what would happen if it allowed its directed, directional relational vectors – like its emphasis on “orientation” – to be informed by the more ambient, less object-centered terminology of ecocritics like Timothy Morton.³⁹ For if queer theory has by definition been an oppositional, anti-normative, reactive field, it may be worth wondering what it would

³⁸ Jill E. Anderson, ““Warm blood and live semen and rich marrow and wholesome flesh!”: A Queer Ecological Reading of Christopher Isherwood’s *A Single Man*,” *The Journal of Ecocriticism: A New Journal of Nature, Society, and Literature* 3.1 (January 2011), 53.

³⁹ This is not to deny, of course, the extent to which queer theory is invested in (theorizing and practicing) polymorphous sexualities. However, even discussions of multiple attachments and forms of polyamory tend to simply multiply the relationships between subject and object that we think of as being foundational to sexuality (or orientation) rather than to rethink their very shape.

mean to practice an intransitive queering – to understand “queer” as a state to be risen to, or as an otherwise affirmative act, rather than as a cancelling gesture.⁴⁰

Spinsters & Spinsterliness

Understanding “queer” in an objectless way can return us once again to the province of the spinsterly. For this project finds solutions to queer ecocriticism’s temporal, affective, and methodological challenges in the figure of spinster, whom I take as an exemplar of indirect (or objectless) relation both to the future and the desire itself. It was only when I turned to spinsters accidentally – via Benson’s critique of Carson – that I realized that I had been writing about them all along. From the elderly denizens of Jewett’s Dunnet Landing, who live near death as they live near the sea, to Thoreau’s autobiographical personae in *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* alike, to Emily Dickinson, sewing poems into fascicles in a corner room in Amherst, to Rachel Carson, discredited above, my literary companions have, for many years, been spinsters; the muted affects and plotless unfoldings that I have come to admire in the works that I read have always been spinsterly in tone and form alike. Yet while I often thought of these texts as being in a deeply resonant and somehow organic conversation with one another, “spinster” was not a word that I would have used to connect them.

⁴⁰ It is also worth wondering what “queer” as insistently transitive verb necessarily does to its objects. Hird and Giffney’s title, for instance, presumes that the “non/human” is an entity or a category in need of queering – a move that irreparably normativizes it. But what of all the ways in which the non/human [and the nonhuman] is so often *already* queer? [For more on this possibility, see Joan Roughgarden, *Evolution’s Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: U of California P, 2005) and Bruce Bagemihl, *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999).] The natural world’s fundamental queerness forms of the basis of both Garrard’s and Morton’s forays into queer ecology; however, neither of them takes this fact as occasion to consider how “queer” as a verb or a process might otherwise mean.

But if I found the figure I was looking for only belatedly, then that, too, is apt. For the spinster herself is legible as a kind of social outsider precisely insofar as she has been abstracted from time. She *becomes* a spinster only once it has been determined that she likely has no marriageable future; when that happens, however, she also comes to have no past – or at least no past in which a future, or the desire for one, ever existed. (We need think here only of the oddly virginal resonances of the phrase “old maid,” which erases the spinster’s lived past in favor of a kind of ahistorical, perpetual innocence.) But in the context of an environmentalism whose futurity is predicated on transmission and parceled out in twenty-five-year generations, where does the spinster – quintessentially childless, by definition uncoupled, by reputation asexual – find her future? When does the spinster’s day come? Guided by such questions, this project explores the alternate modes of relation – to temporality, to desire, to the notion of community, to death, to the environment and environmentality themselves – that the spinster embodies.

If the spinster’s askance (non-maternal, non-biological) relationship to the future makes her an odd candidate for environmental activism, then another stereotypical element of her role – her asexuality, her asceticism, her presumed estrangement from her own body – potentially makes her the environmentalist *par excellence*. For who better to embody the relinquishment of desires than a person defined precisely by such relinquishment? Indeed, the spinster is frequently treated (even in environmental[ist] contexts) as metonym for a kind of restraint and prudishness. In his meditation on gardening, for instance, Michael Pollan discusses the ways in which horticultural catalogs characterize their products and thereby differentiate themselves from one another. Comparing the White Flower Farm catalog (based in Connecticut) to its counterpart from Wayside Farms (based in South Carolina), Pollan writes:

If White Flower proposes a garden fit for Cabots and Lodges, Wayside has one Scarlett O’Hara would die for. From the photographs alone it’s possible to distinguish Amos

Pettingill's subdued Connecticut aesthetic from the more demonstrative one operating in Hodges, South Carolina. Wayside likes to photograph its flowers when they are in full blooms, wide open and almost past their peak – as in one of those Dutch still lifes where blossoms poise on the verge of shattering and decadence hovers in the wings. Wayside blooms press forward from their pages provocatively, many of them bursting free of their frames, almost as if from a bodice. The effect is frankly sensual, yet never garish – except, perhaps, to a Puritan eye.

I imagine the voluptuousness of the Wayside catalog must scandalize the Yankee competition up in Litchfield, where flowers are always photographed at a discreet distance and several days before their peak. Set before me are a Wayside and a White Flower photograph of the same flower, a Madame Hardy rose. In White Flower's picture, she appears somewhat chaste, her innumerable white petals not yet open all the way; something is withheld. In Wayside, the same flower is shot several days later, her petals now opened to expose the green button-eye stamen within. Wayside's catalog copy extols her "slight blush," "delicious fragrance," and blooms "produced freely in June." White Flower refuses to effuse, reporting matter-of-factly that "Mme. Hardy has earned a spot at the back of the Moon Garden adjoining our house, where she is most welcome." Wayside revels in the sexiness of its flowers, acknowledging their claims on our senses, in a way that White Flower would not dare. White Flower likes to think of its flowers as dowager aunts or dutiful daughters, but never as sex objects.⁴¹

Although my primary point of interest here is how the demure White Flower roses are cast "as dowager aunts" who are, of course, "never...sex objects," I have cited this passage at length because of the telling nexus of vocabulary that populates it. For the spinsterly flower – like its nursery's aesthetic more generally – is "subdued" and "somewhat chaste." It stands at a "discreet distance" from its interlocutor (in this case, the consumer and his surrogate, the camera). Even though it is for sale, aiming to be appealing to the purchaser, it does not reveal itself entirely; "something is withheld."⁴² Indeed, all of the language attached to the demure flowers is that of distance and restraint – a sentiment only increased by the fact that the Connecticut nursery's stock is also implicitly defined by everything it is not (or, in other words, in opposition to

⁴¹ Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education* (New York: Grove Press, 1991), 210. Hereafter cited in the text.

⁴² And in the context of a catalog – as in the context of literature – this becomes also a tonal question; the copy surrounding the dowager aunt rose "refuses to effuse," instead "reporting matter-of-factly."

everything that the Wayside rose is): “demonstrative,” “decaden[t],” “provocative,” “sensual,” “delicious,” “sex[y],” and “free.”⁴³

A similar set of descriptors appears in a roughly contemporaneous *New York Times* column about the phenomenon of the spinster; there, Molly Haskell recalls a childhood populated both by actual spinsters and the fear of one’s own potential spinsterdom:

In the South, everybody played Old Maid – married couples, bachelor uncles, people too lazy to play bridge, but it had particular meaning for those of us who’d recently attained dating age. Using a deck from which all the queens except the queen of spades had been removed, we sat in a circle, successively passing cards, forming and eliminating pairs. The girl left at the end with that stark, unmated queen was destined to become – a fate worse than death – an old maid.

The image of the spinster as synonymous with lovelessness and incompleteness has all but disappeared. The very word has an archaic ring, like arranged marriages, virgin, and antimacassars. In the South, which remained Victorian longer than the rest of the country, every family had at least two maiden aunts, every girls’ school its panoply of spinster schoolmarms – to warn us off a similar fate, but also to hint at some strange, proud island of femininity uncolonized by men.

Like witch, spinster was a scareword, a stereotype that served to embrace and isolate a group of women with vastly different dispositions, talents, situations, but whose common bond – never having become one half of a pair – was enough to throw into question the rules and presumed priorities on which society was founded.⁴⁴

Once again, the language attached to the spinster is awash in connotations of lack; not only has the “isolate[d]” spinster traditionally been “synonymous with lovelessness and incompleteness,”

⁴³ We might hear echoes here, too, of Sylvia Plath’s 1956 poem “Spinster,” in which the spinster’s aloofness is figured through her retreat from the abundance of the natural world. (“Spinster,” *The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992).) An entire monograph could be written on the way in which spinsters in American literature/history are (a) depicted as retreating from the bounty of fertile nature or (b) themselves metaphorized as barren natural objects. An 1911 article on “The Spinster” in the *Freewoman*, for instance, began: “I write of the High Priestess of Society. Not of the mother of sons, but of her barren sister, the withered tree, the acidulous vessel under whose pale shadow we chill and whiten, of the Spinster I write” (cited in Jeffreys 1995, 95). And such resonances are not culturally specific. In Arabic, for instance, the word for spinster – A’anis – has three meanings beyond its social context: a dull tree branch; one who looks in the mirror more often than is necessary; a strong female camel (Ammar and Mayton, 2009). This alignment of failed femininity with barren and dying nature bears an important relation, of course, to (a) the gendering of nature as female (an important aspect of many readings of “Nutting,” particularly those produced by feminist critics) and (b) the understanding of queerness as being fundamentally unnatural.

⁴⁴ Molly Haskell, “Paying Homage to the Spinster,” *The New York Times* (May 8, 1988).

defined by “never having become one half of a pair,” but even those terms (vaguely affirmative, if only by virtue of the glaringness of their many absences) have faded into a kind of cultural invisibility or illegibility; the image has “disappeared,” and the word itself “has an archaic ring.” The spinster, it seems, has little control over anything – including her own cultural obsolescence.⁴⁵ Indeed, the repetition of the word “fate” in Haskell’s account also throws into relief the stereotypical passivity of the spinster; that not marrying may be an affirmative

⁴⁵ For more on the disappearance of the spinster figure in American culture, see Naomi Braun Rosenthal, *Spinster Tales and Womanly Possibilities* (Albany: State U of New York P, 2002), particularly the preface. Although the fading of the spinster in popular imagination may seem to indicate a kind of social progress (where society now may have more tolerance for single women, where the marrying age has increased, etc.), queer theorists like Heather Love (and, less convincingly, Lee Edelman) have taught us to be wary of what rhetorics of pride and inclusion may obscure. In Love’s case, this means primarily a narrative of injury, loneliness, and shame foundational to historical queer subjects; in the case of the spinster, I worry that understanding her as obsolete might simply make invisible experience of the aging single woman in America. This is not to say that “spinster” is the ideal term, but rather that the experience of the woman labeled as such remains culturally important – and worth attending to – today. Interestingly, in the time that I have spent writing this dissertation, the spinster has experienced a resurgence in popular culture; see, for instance, the *30 Rock* episode “It’s Never Too Late For Now,” which features Tina Fey’s character Liz Lemon as a self-proclaimed spinster caring for a cat named Emily Dickinson (*30 Rock*, NBC [February 17, 2011]), or the *New York Times* article “Let’s Hear It For Aunthood,” which opens with the line, “For simplicity’s sake, let’s call me a childless spinster,” and goes on to extol the virtues of being an aunt. (Kate Bolick, “Let’s Hear It For Aunthood,” *The New York Times*, September 16, 2011.) A less celebratory treatment of the spinster made its way into the mainstream media with the attention paid to the marital status, sexuality, and life choices of Elena Kagan following her nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court in 2010. Maureen Dowd opened a column on Kagan by asking, “When does a woman go from being single to unmarried?” (Maureen Dowd, “All the Single Ladies,” *The New York Times*, 18 May 2010.) As she goes on to reflect, “Single carries a connotation of eligibility and possibility, while unmarried has that dreaded over-the-hill, out-of-luck, you-are-finished, no-chance implication. An aroma of mothballs and perpetual aunt.” Dowd’s column – like the broader fervor surrounding Kagan – raises interesting questions about the relationship between sexuality, queerness, and spinsterhood. Whereas in Benson’s critique of Carson, “spinster” seems to be a simile for some version of “odd” or “queer” (and indeed, Carson has been adopted posthumously as a member of the queer community – see, for instance, the entry “Rachel Carson” in *LGBT: Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History in America*, ed. Marc Stein [New York: Charles Scribner, 2005]), in the White House’s recent rhetoric, spinster becomes a (cloistered, asexual) displacement of “queer.” In a weak rebuttal to such rhetoric, Dowd simply insists that Kagan may not (yet, or forever) be a spinster, that she may still have time to say yes to the future, that it may in fact not be too late. But what if we were to take her spinster status seriously, and to consider the political implications of spinsters serving on the highest court of the land – where their job is to preside over our collective legal future, to establish the precedents according to which our institutions will act? Regardless of Kagan’s sexual orientation, this seems like a uniquely queer relationship to the future – again, one that is perhaps more avuncular (more like that of a spinster ecologist) than anything else.

decision, after all, has long been inconceivable.⁴⁶ And the word “spinster” itself, of course, is not one that a woman typically attaches to herself.

Yet Haskell’s idea that the spinster can somehow be desirable – that her life might “hint at some strange, proud island of femininity uncolonized by men” – raises the concomitant possibility that the spinster could also be desiring: and not simply in a straight(forward) romantic way that by definition seems to disappear as soon as this identitarian term is assigned to her. This project thus aims to complicate the affective register of the spinster’s experience – not for its own sake (although such a move does help the spinster more comfortably dwell within the realm of queer theory), but rather because of how doing so might help us rethink the way in which affects and desires meet (and constitute, and conflict with) environmental investment. Rather than focusing on the spinster’s refusals, then, the pages that follow emphasize her affects and affections alike. For it is the spinster who retains as primary the relationships that tend to give way to other attachments over the course of a more normative developmental trajectory: to siblings, to friends, to the dead, to the young. Taking seriously the importance of these kinds of relationships – and their varying temporal vectors – might help us to rethink environmentalism’s intertwined emphases on child-rearing, the linear unfolding of the future, and the vertical paradigms of normative inheritance and intergenerational transmission alike. How might shifting our attention from children (whose arrival on the planet serves to embody the otherwise unlocatable “future”) to those who seem to be defined precisely by their lack of a future (the spinster, primarily, but also the terminally ill, the dead, and the aged) help us to develop a more inclusive – and also a more rigorous – environmentalist practice and rhetoric alike? And how

⁴⁶ Exemplary of this view is Dorothy Yost Deegan’s 1951 monograph, *The Stereotype of the Single Woman in American Novels: A Social Study with Implications for the Education of Women* (New York: King’s Crown Press of Columbia U P, 1951), which was awarded a prize by Pi Lambda Theta, the National Association for Women in Education.

might separating questions of desire from questions of the sexual, the bodily, and the romantic help us develop a language of environmental investment apart from our pervasive rhetoric of “love”? What forms of desire constitute and suffuse a figure like the spinster, who is typically defined precisely by her lack thereof or failures therein?

The answers to these questions might productively return us to the realm of objectlessness and intransitivity: not because the spinster loves or desires or cherishes nothing, certainly, but precisely because her forms of care tend to be somewhat less directed – perhaps somewhat more promiscuous (in the loveliest of ways) – than those whose lives are governed by more normative patterns. Without a nuclear family of her own to devote the majority of her energy and attention to – without a spouse, without a lover, without children – she is free not only to attend to a wide range of people and relations, but also to invest herself deeply in aspects of her experience that we don’t typically allow to constitute primary attachments: the place where she lives, the memories she holds dear, the communities she visits and calls her own, her far-flung friends, the dead, her past and the way it lingers still.⁴⁷ These attachments rarely seem to cohere into the form of persistent or consistent objects. Instead they linger ambiently, drifting into one another like fog; they make themselves felt at one moment and recede into the background the next.

Each of the chapters that follows focuses on a different form of (spinsterly) social relationship.⁴⁸ My reading of Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* considers both the

⁴⁷ Here, I am reminded of a question that Anne-Lise François posed to an undergraduate seminar on Green Romanticism that I was lucky enough to sit in on: What if the queerest thing about Jewett’s narrator is her affective relationship to place? (Class Discussion, Cornell University, November 15, 2007.)

⁴⁸ In this, the project might be seen to respond to/engage with Michel Foucault’s famous assertion, in “Friendship as a Way of Life,” that rather than “[relating] the question of homosexuality to the problem of ‘Who am I?’ and ‘What is the secret of my desire?’[,] [p]erhaps It would be better to ask oneself, ‘What

friendships shared between the aged Dunnet Landingers (many of whom are childless spinsters, some of whom are long dead) and the intimacies that quietly burgeon between the town's residents and a summer visitor. These non-dyadic relationships – which I consider to be examples of relational intransitivity – are both deeply suffused with and often analogical to the relationships that the same characters share with the place that they call home; they dwell near each other, for instance, as they dwell near death and as they dwell near the sea. The resulting intimacies are characterized by restraint; the parties involved ask little of one another and find much in return. These kinds of horizontal connections are expanded in the Thoreau chapter with attention to a sibling relationship that persists, elegiacally and literarily, after one brother's untimely death. This relationship through and to deadness itself, I argue, becomes the ground not only for the persistence of interpersonal intimacy (an intimacy that, in classic Thoreauvian fashion, is predicated on distance) but also for historical knowledge and environmental investment alike. In this way, the horizontality of sibling relationships meets the more vertical vector of traditional historical retrospection, yielding modes of forward movement and retrospection that I deem the temporal intransitive. A similar meeting of the vectors transpires in the final chapter, where I read Rachel Carson's spinsterly stewardship and ecology in terms of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theorizing of the possibilities inherent in avuncularity. The avuncular, I argue (pace Sedgwick), becomes a way of moving diagonally into the future, and sets the stage for a mode of environmental futurity separated from both the temporal and relational norms so deeply embedded in environmentalism's rhetoric of "future generations." Rather than reiterating our customary emphasis on direct inheritance and biological reproduction, the texts in this

relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied, and modulated?' The problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of one's sex, but, rather, to use one's sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships" ("Friendship as a Way of Life," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow [New York: The New Press, 1997], 135).

chapter (by Carson, Jewett, and Thoreau) suggest that we may be able to think about collateral forms of continuance, or in terms of the intergenerational intransitive.

“Spinster” thus stands for many things in the context of *Spinster Ecology*. (1) She is at times a literary character with certain foundational traits. (Here we might be reminded of Haskell’s comment that spinsters’ “vastly different dispositions, talents, situations” are at times overshadowed by their “common bond – never having become one half of a pair.”) She is unmarried, and past the “marrying age.” She is not a biological parent, though she is often an aunt (and frequently a beloved one at that). She fills the contours of her singleness with other (often distinctly non-normative) forms of investment and relation. (2) She is at times a biological persona, an author whose ideas and forms alike are informed by the experiences sketched out above.⁴⁹ (And yet, as my chapter on Thoreau will suggest, she need not be female. She may be an uncle, or a mapmaker, or a pencilmaker, or a son.⁵⁰) (3) She stands in for (because she lives and/or writes in) a characteristic affective register, one characterized by affirmative and deeply invested incarnations of the terms typically (and often critically) applied to her – nouns like

⁴⁹ Here, I agree with Rob Nixon, who writes: “I am aware that so-called biographical criticism has fallen out of favor, yet it seems to me that biographical context often remains invaluable, especially (though not exclusively) when one is considering nonfiction” (288). As my chapters will suggest, these writers – particularly Carson and Thoreau – were repeatedly discredited and critiqued on the grounds of their spinsterliness/singleness, a fact that becomes important to the textual and theoretical readings that their work inspires.

⁵⁰ Naomi Braun Rosenthal begins to gesture toward such a possibility, I would suggest, when she labels the spinster a “female bachelor” (7). However, I am more inclined to deem the bachelor – or at least a certain kind of bachelor – a “male spinster.” “Bachelor” (both to our contemporary ears and to their nineteenth-century counterparts) speaks to a kind of sexual or romantic potential (to a particular brand of virility) that the spinster, past marriageable age, is believed to no longer have. My male spinsters (Henry David Thoreau, Jewett’s Elijah Tilley and Captain Littlepage) are, like the stereotypical spinster, understood to be fundamentally futureless. (For representations of bachelorhood in the nineteenth century, see [for instance] Ik Marvel, *Reveries of a Bachelor*, and Herman Melville, “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids.”)

distance, restraint, remoteness, and aloofness.⁵¹ (4) She inspires, practices, and/or is best represented within a characteristic literary style or form or tone – one that I deem spinsterliness – inspired by and reflective of these affirmatively reticent affects.

Although these four instantiations of spinsterdom may seem to define “spinster” as a particular identity category or character type, the pages that follow ultimately posit spinsterliness as a stance or social position that can be more widely (even universally) adopted. The spinsters in this project thus serve to model a tonality of social engagement and a mode of temporal movement that, although tied to the biographical or characterological spinster’s particular paradigms of (non-)relationality, can also be developed apart from them. One need not be a spinster, in other words, to be spinsterly. One need not be a spinster to be a spinster ecologist.

Spinster Ecology

The chapters of *Spinster Ecology* engage these facets of spinsterhood in different combinations, and with different emphases. Chapter One addresses spinsterliness as an interpersonal, affective, and narratological paradigm. The argument opens with the first-person narrator of Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, reading her persistent anonymity in terms of an ethic of acquaintance predicated on reticence, and asking what it might mean to consider a mode of social engagement that is (in the narrator’s words) “remote and islanded.” The narrator is a figure about whom we know little, biographically or factually speaking, but who persists – virtually environmentally or atmospherically – in our midst, becoming the conduit or mode through which we know all else. Whereas readings of her characterological minimalism typically

⁵¹ Although one way to recuperate the spinster would be to examine her very real affective investments to challenge the appellation of these very terms, I am more interested in using an exploration of these same investments instead to challenge the terms’ definition or customary usage. The spinster, I argue, practices – and thereby models – a form of intimate distance and invested restraint.

either invest it with ideological significance or treat it as a hermeneutic cheat to be overcome, I am interested in considering her distance or anonymity as such, particularly insofar as our lack of direct access to her is our central mode of relating to the book.

After developing my argument about the narrator, I use her invisibility to reconsider Heather Love's recent queer readings of *Pointed Firs*, which understand the narrator as a queer subject whose backwardness and inaccessibility are indicative of historical injury and irredeemable longing. Although I find such invocations of Jewett compelling insofar as they invite a critical audience otherwise unlikely to engage American regionalism, and gesture toward the possible political stakes of the work's "remote and islanded" stance,⁵² it seems important to me to acknowledge that for Jewett's text to be understood as queer need not mean that she is a figure of loneliness, longing, or (affective) backwardness. Instead of adopting Love's terms, I linger with the lexicon of Jewett's book itself, identifying a tone of sufficiency that is neither an indicator of political quietism nor the nostalgic preservation of a rapidly receding past but rather an affective register that opens up the possibilities of and for relation. The result is a mode of non-dyadic interpersonal connection in which relation and investment exist apart from the objects thereof, and – as in "Nutting" – relation can be understood less in terms of contact than in terms of tending, extension, and reach. Throughout the chapter, I argue that Jewett's pervasive descriptions of ambient environmentality – of the scent of herbs, the splash of the sea, the hue of the sky – not only become a model for her alternative paradigms of interpersonal relation, but

⁵² "Remote and islanded" is a phrase that appears during the narrator's pilgrimage to the island where Poor Joanna, a hermetic Dunnet Landinger, lived out the balance of her days after abandoning society. The paragraphs that detail the end of this journey are at the heart of Love's analysis of the text's hopeless loneliness and isolation; I would like instead to think about the communicative or relational potential of this remote and islanded condition, particularly as it might illuminate something about our stance as literary critics. Acknowledging distance without either eliminating or resigning ourselves to it might allow us to see remoteness as a practice or a mode as much as it is a condition. Might there be a way of reading "remote[ly] and islanded[ly]"?

also allow us to feel the temporal expanses in which such relationships take place, and across or through which they persist.

Where Chapter One focuses on characters who live in gentle proximity to absence and death alike, Chapter Two considers the environmental and interpersonal status of absence itself. It focuses on Thoreau's 1849 travelogue *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, wherein insurmountable distances become constitutive not only of the book's investment in cultural and environmental history, but also of its peculiar status as elegy and travelogue alike. *A Week* is in part a work of mourning for Thoreau's brother and best friend John, his companion in the 1839 voyage that inspired the book, who died of lockjaw in the interval between the journey itself and the narrating of it. The text, however, never names John, and in fact scarcely engages with him at all. Ultimately, however, *A Week's* mode of understanding the past through paradigms of deflected relation means that Thoreau's reveries, self-reflections, and meditations on local history become a way of presenting John's lostness as a mode of relating to him. Death, I argue, rather than becoming a horizon of relation instead becomes relation's very ground – like the “freshet and frost and fire” which in *Walden* both separate Thoreau from and connect him to what he calls the real. In contrast to those critics who understand *A Week* to have redemptive aims, and who search for traces of John's (recuperated) presence in the book's pages, my reading suggests that Thoreau's elegy comes not in its avowed subject matter but in its capacity to make absence and distance felt as such. Reading this non-redemptive elegy alongside and through the book's intensely digressive travelogue (which loses its course far more often than it follows it), I argue that *A Week* develops a principle of engagement (interpersonal, historical, and environmental) predicated not on directness but rather on deflection, suspension, and drift.

The third chapter picks up where this final sentiment leaves off, and argues that the figure of the spinster can help to resolve the challenges of queer environmental futurity insofar as she practices an avuncular form of stewardship, tending the future without contributing directly to it. By looking at a series of texts that take up this mode of invested indirection in their content and their form, I make the case for a spinster ecology that alters our notion not only of where the future lies but also of how (or if) it arrives. I look first to *Silent Spring* and argue that Carson's intransitive understanding of ecological consequence confounds the gestures of refusal and negation that have dominated recent queer theoretical treatments of the future. I then return briefly to Jewett, and suggest that the complex futurity of *Silent Spring* has a literary correlate in the indirect structural unfolding of *Pointed Firs*. This avuncular style, as I deem it, complicates the sense – prevalent in contemporary environmentalism – that futurity is the province of parents. So too does the writing of Thoreau, who, in an 1851 journal entry, compared the neuter insects discussed in Agassiz and Gould's new *Principles of Zoology* to the "maiden aunts & bachelor uncles" among whose ranks he counted himself. By connecting Thoreau's analogical meditation on aphides to Carson's support of turning insects' reproductive capacities against themselves (as a form of "psychological warfare" that can serve as an alternative to DDT), the chapter argues for the paradoxical notion of a productive sterility. Such a concept, I argue, yields a qualitative, ecological alternative to the quantitative discourse of neo-Malthusianism that has dictated recent queer ecological treatments of reproduction, and demonstrates how the queer subject might affirmatively contribute to reproductive futurity rather than either resisting it or getting out of its way. It thus makes the case for what we (via Thoreau and Sedgwick) might deem a process of *collateral generation* – and, relatedly, for the importance of aunts and uncles (and the practice of aunting) to environmental stewardship and ecological futurity.

The chapter concludes with a reading of Carson's 1953 book *The Sense of Wonder*, and argues that its non-linear treatment of time and open posture toward the uncertainties of the future are central to its model of what it looks like (and how it feels) to parent *avuncularly*. By comparing *The Sense of Wonder* to a more recent book on environmental parenting – Steingraber's *Raising Elijah: Protecting Our Children in an Age of Environmental Crisis* – the chapter envisions the possibilities of an environmentalism predicated on – and conducted in – the temporality of the *as if*. I argue that an ecocriticism that pays heed to non-reproductive (and indirectly invested) figures like the spinster might inspire both a queer theoretical and an environmental(ist) practice attentive to affects customarily considered too weak or quiet to be socially efficacious. By redefining where and how we see the future, the spinster also alters our sense of how we might best move toward it, no longer permitting us to understand the present and future as mutually delimiting terms. The result is a model of care that allows distance, indirection, and aloofness to persist, and that transforms the vexed concept of “enoughness” from a chastening limitation to a quietly affirmative state.

The project's conclusion takes up questions of planetary and personal ends, turning directly to contemporary environmental rhetoric surrounding the “death of the planet,” and suggesting that a meeting of queer theory and ecocriticism might help the environmental movement more effectively think through its relationship to planetary “illness” and “terminality.” Bill McKibben asserts that “[t]he end of nature probably also makes us reluctant to attach ourselves to its remnants, for the same reason that we usually don't choose friends from among the terminally ill.... There is no future in loving nature.”⁵³ And yet queer theory – in part (but not solely) because of its early and deep associations with the AIDS crisis – doesn't write

⁵³ Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989), 179. Hereafter cited in the text.

off the possibility of relating at and to “the end” but instead thinks through its very real complexities. For Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, for instance, the condition of being terminal (and the experience of witnessing others’ terminality) woven through her most intimate friendships forces her to rethink the normative generational and developmental paradigms that contemporary environmentalism so deeply takes for granted. Through a rereading of American literary regionalism – often understood as a genre by the terminal, about the terminal, for those whose way of life will survive – and a return once again to *Pointed Firs*, the chapter ultimately argues for a model of interpersonal and environmental investment separated from longevity and even, potentially, from life itself. Ultimately, I argue that regionalism’s and queer theory’s investment in the future of those who seem to have no future – and in the future of our relationship to them – can illuminate possibilities for relation, engagement, and investment where environmentalists see solely impasse or failure.

Whereas existing works of queer ecocriticism have focused primarily on the status of “the natural,” on the one hand, and queer modes of inhabiting space, on the other, this project’s main interventions relate to questions of tone and temporality.⁵⁴ By attending to spinsterliness in ways that I do, I seek less to challenge or eliminate the words customarily attached to the spinster – those words cataloged above, like “distance,” “isolation,” “subdued,” and “restrained” – than to rethink both what they mean and how they feel. By examining the interpersonal affects and environmental investments of “maiden aunts” and “bachelor uncles”⁵⁵ as they appear in literary

⁵⁴ In addition to the works of queer ecocriticism cited above, see Catriona Sandilands, “Lesbian Separatist Communities and the Experience of Nature: Toward a Queer Ecology” (*Organization and Environment* 15.2 [2002]) and Bruce Erickson, “‘fucking close to water’: Queering the Production of the Nation,” *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, eds. Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson (Indianapolis & Bloomington: Indiana U P, 2010).

⁵⁵ I take these words from Haskell’s discussion above, but they are also the terms employed by Thoreau in an 1851 journal entry on non-reproductive insects. For more on this context, see Chapter Three.

contexts – and as their characteristics inhere in literary form – *Spinster Ecology* considers terms that we typically think of as being the product of repressions in an alternately affirmative context. What if we understood distance and withholding not as gestures of (self-)denial but instead as constituting an affirmative relational and even activist ethic?⁵⁶ What if we read the experience of being “remote and islanded” – as Jewett’s Mrs. Todd describes the hermetic spinster Poor Joanna – not as a condition to be lamented or resolved but instead as a quietly satisfying state? This project – via the spinster – suggests that contact (like desire) is not simply something to be either embraced or refused. Instead, like Wordsworth, I am invested in alternate tonalities of “Touch – .”

By thus engaging spinsterly tone, this project aims also to develop an alternate understanding of the spinster’s relationship to time. For when we think of the temporal terms in

⁵⁶ Indeed, it is worth acknowledging the centrality of the unmarried woman to many of the important activist movements (and moments) in American history. A friend of mine, writing a dissertation in Cornell’s History department on school nursing and Progressive Era reform, was startled to realize (when we first began discussing my work) that “spinster” was a term that could be applied to most, if not all, of her project’s protagonists and heroines. Naomi Braun Rosenthal locates the origin of the project that became *Spinster Tales and Womanly Possibilities* in a similar realization: “My interest in the cultural history of women who remained single had its genesis in an earlier project – an analysis of the organizational connections of several groups of nineteenth-century women reformers [one of whom, Lillian Wald, is a centerpiece of my friend’s work as well]. As I looked at the career patterns of a group of notable New York women activists of the period, I found that fewer than three-quarters of their number had ever married. I also discovered, in looking at both comments of the time and histories of the period, that the accomplishments of the spinsters among that group had been at least partially contingent on freedom from marital entanglement” (2). Sheila Jeffreys likewise identifies Florence Nightingale as “one of these [activist] women who refused to marry. She comments that there were women who sacrificed marriage, ‘because they must sacrifice all their life is they accepted that...behind *his* destiny woman must annihilate herself” (*The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930* [London, Boston, and Henley: Pandora Press, 1985], 88). And this is true of environmental activism as well; in *Savage Dreams*, Rebecca Solnit ties her own (remote, somewhat reticent) activist involvement to practices of solitude and peripateticism and impersonal care. These investments distance her from the nuclear family paradigms that are embodied by a scene in the Yosemite Valley, where “most of the campers were already sitting around fires and lanterns, in a circle of light that substituted for the walls of home by making everything outside invisible once the eyes adjust” (249). This description follows on her reflection that she “rarely saw anyone else alone in the valley, except for a few people painting or fly fishing. The bustle and the congeniality made my solitude more intense, and I withdrew more and more into myself, felt stranger and stranger for not being a part of a group or a family” (229).

which the spinster is described – “*still* unmarried,” “*beyond* the usual age for marriage,” “*never having become* one half of a pair”⁵⁷ – we can’t help but acknowledge the awkward relationship of the spinster to her own present tense, which is always suspended between what she has yet to do and what she has failed to do. (Indeed, we might remember here the odd temporality of the phrase “old maid” itself, which seems simultaneously to look backward and gesture ahead.) Whereas the recent *30 Rock* episode depicting Liz Lemon’s (failed) escape from her own spinsterly fate revolves around – and is titled after – a song whose *carpe diem* message is embodied in the line “It’s Never Too Late For Now,” this project’s spinsters live in an awkward temporality where it is somehow always both too late and too soon for now.⁵⁸ But as is often the case in this project, what historically has been taken as a way of discrediting spinsterly agency here forms the ground of my inquiry. The chapters that follow take up this spinsterly way of dwelling within a form of temporal suspension that, shaped by (sometimes nostalgic) retrospect and (sometimes wary) anticipation, invites alternate forms of relation and engagement alike.⁵⁹

The exemplar of what it means to live within this suspended temporality is a character to whom this project repeatedly will return: Jewett’s Elijah Tilley, the retired seafarer who passes

⁵⁷ The first two phrases here come from definitions of spinsterhood explored by Naomi Braun Rosenthal (9-11). The final phrase comes from Molly Haskell’s article, cited above.

⁵⁸ “It’s Never Too Late For Now.” *30 Rock*. NBC. February 17, 2011.

⁵⁹ If the spinster inspires questions of temporal suspension, then queer ecocriticism as a field, interestingly enough, might do the same. If queer theory (which has, of late, been questioning its own ongoing relevance (see Warner, 2012; Halley & Parker, 2011)) has come (and maybe gone), and if ecocriticism is in its (crisis-based) heyday, then queer ecocriticism is yet to arrive. Appearing on the queer theoretical scene when its practitioners have begun to sound the field’s death knell, and arriving midway through an environmental(ist) summit that always worries it is too late for it to achieve its own political and planetary aims, queer ecocriticism exists in an awkward relationship to the camps it seeks to both join and affect: it is both too early and too late. It is perhaps not on the guest list at all. But perhaps it is precisely the joining of the queer and the ecocritical – and precisely the sense of oddly suspended temporality that results – that might force us to ask difficult questions of and through and in time: How do we reconcile ourselves to our own belatedness? How do we acknowledge that we come to environmental problems late without being paralyzed by a sense – or a fear – that we have arrived too late? (How do we account, in other words, for this belatedness that is not the same as a too-lateness?) What do we do with things – events, challenges, lifespans – that unfold at a pace not assimilable to our customary forms of attention?

his time by keeping watch for his wife, the “poor dear,” who has been dead for eight years.⁶⁰ The distant gaze is a trope throughout *The Country of the Pointed Firs*; as the narrator reflects when looking at the Blackett family daguerreotypes, “[t]here was in the eyes a look of anticipation and joy, a far-off look that sought the horizon; one often sees it in seafaring families, inherited by boys and girls alike from men who spend their lives at sea, and are always watching for distant sails or the first loom of the land. At sea there is nothing to be seen close by....”⁶¹ Tilley’s watch (or, in Wordsworthian terms, Watch –) extends the parameters of this communal far-off look to incorporate an object that, long gone, will never come; whereas the gentle maiden’s Touch – is timeless, Tilley’s Watch –, both retrospective and anticipatory, gives us (and the book’s narrator, who keeps watch by his side) access to the indirections that suffuse his prolonged present tense. In other words: while both environmental/nature writing and queer theory take the present to be a space of immediate experience, spinsterly time makes legible the distances, sometimes insurmountable, that condition our experience of any “now.”

In so altering our relationship to the present (and its immanent gestures of anticipation and retrospect), the spinsters of this project yield a paradigm of temporal unfolding that serves as an important alternative to – or middle ground between – the forms of rupture favored by queer theory and the forms of linear, biological, genealogical continuity upon which the environmental

⁶⁰ Elijah Tilley is this project’s unlikely touchstone. My discussion will return to him – and, more broadly, to *The Country of the Pointed Firs* – at several junctures that follow. Indeed, it is in part his seeming poor fit with the role of activist or steward – the fact that his loss has already happened (and that, consequently, it is too late to save the “poor dear”), his seemingly paralyzing nostalgia, the fact that (in another character’s words) he is “a ploddin’ man” – that makes him central to *Spinster Ecology*’s rethinking of such paradigms.

⁶¹ Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories*, ed. Mary Ellen Chase (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981), 48. Hereafter cited in the text.

movement predicates its understanding (and promotion) of stewardship.⁶² They exemplify non-normative models of continuity that, rather than unifying the past and present through narratives of direct inheritance, and rather than collapsing our distance from the pasts we remember and the futures we anticipate, instead pay attention to the forms of indirection (and absence, and loss) that unify and connect disparate temporal moments. In so doing, they alter our customary paradigms of “action” and “event,” and force us to realize the indirect, collateral ways in which relationships burgeon and investments are formed. For Tilley’s Watch – , like Wordsworth’s Touch – , becomes both a space and time within which things can happen; what matters, ultimately, is less the missing object of his attention than the ground for relation and investment that such attention becomes.

Ecocriticism, Distance, & Literary Form

In predicating my readings on distance and indirection, I find myself standing as askance to the customary paradigms of ecocritical practice as my spinsters do to normative paradigms of time and relation alike. For ecocriticism, it perhaps goes without saying, has not traditionally been a field comfortable with distance as such. As Ursula Heise suggests, many environmentalist perspectives “associate spatial closeness, cognitive understanding, emotional attachment, and an ethic of responsibility and ‘care.’ Put somewhat more abstractly, they share what philosophers Hans Jonas and Zygmunt Bauman, as well as the sociologist John Tomlinson, have in a broader context called an ‘ethic of proximity.’”⁶³ And this investment in closeness translates, too, into

⁶² This said, environmentalism is also invested in rupture, particularly when it comes to its emphasis on the temporality of “crisis.” For more on political alternatives to the crisis model, see FN 70, below, as well as this project’s conclusion.

⁶³ Ursula Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2008), 33. Heise’s project is invested in challenging these emphases so as to

both stylistic imperative; if environmentalism often operates in a polemical mode, then ecocriticism frequently relies on other ways of achieving rhetorical intensity and immediacy, ranging from narrative scholarship to a rhetoric of presence to what Morton has labeled ecomimesis.⁶⁴ Such a preference for intensity, of course, is less an aesthetic matter than a political one; in Simon Estok's words, "activist intentions...have generated the discourses of immediacy and the aesthetics of contact that have come to characterize ecocriticism" (205) – a fact that seems to stem at least in part that the best (and/or necessary) modifier for "action" or "activism" is some version of "direct."⁶⁵ Indeed, terms like "retreat" and "distance" are treated as curse words by activist-minded ecocritics; Rob Nixon, for instance, warns that "we should be watchful that surface geographical gains [of "world literature" approaches] *are not marred by political retreat*" and that our task as critics is to "imaginatively and strategically render visible

develop a newly ethical mode of global relation; as she emphasizes, "some recent ecological and technological risk scenarios (regional ones such as the nuclear accident at Chernobyl in 1986 or truly global ones such as atmospheric warming and the depletion of the stratospheric ozone layer) affect populations that are geographically, politically, and socially distant from the places where these risks originate" (53). To Heise's list of distances, we might find ourselves wishing to add the temporally distant, a paradigm that in fact forms the basis for Rob Nixon's recent (and remarkable) book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Whereas Heise and Nixon emphasize the ethical imperative of relating to (temporally and spatially) distant objects, people, events, or phenomena, I instead seek to emphasize the ethical capacities of distantly relating, and/or of relating to distance itself. In other words, the spatial and temporal distances that Heise and Nixon emphasize are, in the works I read, immanent to the local scenes at hand rather than opposed to localness itself.

⁶⁴ For an elaboration on what Morton calls "the illusory immediacy of ecomimesis," see *Ecology Without Nature*, 126ff. For more on narrative scholarship, see Scott Slovic, "Seeking the Language of Solid Ground: Reflections on Ecocriticism and Narrative" (*Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction* 1 [fall 1999]), 34-38.

⁶⁵ Likewise, the relationships thought to foster activism are often cast as necessarily and unambiguously direct. In their essay "Activism and Service-Learning: Reframing Volunteerism as Acts of Dissent" (*Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* 2.2 [2002]), Donna M. Bickford and Nedra Reynolds quote a local activist as insisting, noncontroversially, that "[a]ctivism argues for relationships based on connection" (237). My project asks, by contrast, whether activism can be predicated on relationships (to others, to the world, to social causes) that may initially seem disconnected or indirect.

vast force fields of interconnectedness against the *attenuating effects of temporal and geographical distance*.”⁶⁶

This discomfort with distance has led, too, to ecocriticism’s pervasive (and ironic) disregard for and discomfort with literary form.⁶⁷ This distrust seems to stem largely from two intertwined assumptions upon which much contemporary ecocritical practice is based: (a) that literature is at best a form of distance and at worst a form of retreat from the natural world and (b) that retreat and distance are the last things ecocritics – particularly activist-minded ecocritics – ought to embrace. In other words: if direct action is what’s called for in the face of environmental crisis, and if a deflection of immediacy is what the activist impulse in us most fears, then how can we defend the fact that we so often – by definition, as a professional necessity – have our heads in a book? In *The Ecocriticism Reader*, the inaugural anthology in the field, Cheryll Glotfelty writes: “Many of us in colleges and universities worldwide find ourselves in a dilemma. Our temperaments and talents have deposited us in literature departments, but, as

⁶⁶ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 2011), 38, my emphases. Hereafter cited in the text.

⁶⁷ I have eliminated from this discussion a lengthy literature review in support of such a claim. For examples of the disregard for literary form shared by ecocritics who differ on nearly every other conceptual and philosophical front, see the debate between Simon Estok and S.K. Robisch published in the Spring and Autumn 2009 issues of *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (16.2 and 16.4). For the extent to which close, formal readings of literary texts are rare even in those ecocritical works that explicitly resist the field’s emphasis on nature worship/praisesong, see Timothy Morton’s *Ecology Without Nature* and Dana Phillips’s *The Truth of Ecology*. Phillips and Morton both respond to the mimetic thrust of ecocriticism by (implicitly and performatively) suggesting that we do less with literature and literariness; Phillips takes as his dominant archive writings in ecology, science studies, and literary theory/philosophy (as well as the work of contemporary ecocritics, whose thinking he critiques incessantly). Aside from five pages addressing the poetry of A.R. Ammons in the book’s conclusion and brief critiques of the nature writing of Annie Dillard and Barry Lopez in the chapter titled “What Do Nature Writers Want?,” *The Truth of Ecology* includes not a single sustained reading of a literary work. And Morton, despite the sensitive readings of Romantic poetry present throughout his earlier books, chooses not to focus on literature (or literariness) but rather to engage an eclectic archive ranging from the philosophy of Hegel to the films of Derek Jarman to the music of the Talking Heads. For an example of a work that performs exclusively thematic readings of texts despite its claims to be expanding the bounds of what ecocritical reading means, see Astrid Bracke’s contribution to the “Special Forum on Ecocriticism and Ecotheory” published in *ISLE* 17.4 (Autumn 2010).

environmental problems compound, work as usual seems unconscionably frivolous. If we're not part of the solution, we're part of the problem."⁶⁸ Sometimes what constitutes the problem is the mere ("frivolous") act of reading; at other times it is the parameters or tendencies of that reading practice itself. In his own field-defining work of ecocriticism, Lawrence Buell laments: "It is easy to persuade oneself on the basis of the average critical discussion ... that the literary naturescape exists for its formal or symbolic or ideological properties rather than as a place of literal reference or as an object of retrieval or contemplation for its own sake. It is unthinkable that Bryant could have sought to immerse himself in the natural history of the gentian, or Frost in observing spiders. And so professors of literature, whatever their behavior in ordinary life, easily become antienvironmentalists in their professional practice" (85). The traditional dictates of the academy, these critics posit, run counter to environmental(ist) aims; those who dare to read symbolically or formally become – before they can even catch their breath, or defend themselves – "antienvironmentalists." There is no sense that the "formal properties" of a text may contribute to its environmentality – or that the experience of reading literarily may be able to constitute a form of environmental investment – rather than detracting irrevocably from it.

This ecocritical belief in – or desire for – immediacy or presence places literature itself in an irrevocably awkward position, serving as a surrogate for a reality that the critic values above the text. In the opening pages of *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell finds himself in precisely such a conceptual conundrum:

Like all specialized discourses, [criticism on the subject of art's representation of nature] has been driven by disciplinary imperatives that create a skewed elegance of result. For instance, to posit a disjunction between text and world is both an indispensable starting point for mature literary understanding and a move that tends to efface the world. Other

⁶⁸ Cheryll Glotfelty, "Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis," *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996), xviii-xix. Hereafter cited in the text.

disjunctions follow from this one, like that between text and author and the collapse of the distinction between fiction and nonfiction. The problems are aggravated by the cloistral, urbanized quality of the environment in which this criticism tends to be practiced. When an author undertakes to imagine someone else's imagination of a tree while sitting, Bartleby-like, in a cubicle with no view, small wonder if the tree seems to be nothing more than a textual function and one comes to doubt that the author could have fancied otherwise.... American literary history thus presents the spectacle of having identified representation of the natural environment as a major theme while marginalizing the literature devoted most specifically to it and reading the canonical books in ways that minimize their interest in representing the environment as such.⁶⁹

Throughout Buell's discussion, levels of distance and mediation proliferate and, it seems, become increasingly problematic for environmental criticism: there is the "disjunction between text and world," the distance between the critic ("sitting, Bartleby-like, in a cubicle with no view") and the world, the distance inherent to the critical enterprise (which involves "[imagining] someone else's imagination"), and the distance between the environment of the academy (with its "cloistral, urbanized quality") and the natural environment where the critic would prefer to dwell. For someone who has spent his career immersed in literary study, Buell is oddly skeptical about the power of both imagination and textuality to teach us not only something about actual trees, but also – and perhaps more importantly – about our ethical relationship to them. Related to this odd skepticism is the simultaneous elusiveness and apparent narrowness of Buell's definition of the "world," an entity that he thinks textuality and literariness themselves can only "efface."

Some of my discomfort with Buell's reasoning is shared by Dana Phillips, who spends much of the introduction to *The Truth of Ecology* mercilessly critiquing *The Environmental Imagination*:

⁶⁹ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge & London: Belknap Press of Harvard U P, 1995), 5, 9-10. Hereafter cited in the text. Later in the same discussion he says, even more forcefully: "Operating from the premise of intractable textuality, we find it hard to resist the resistance to nature that is second nature to us in our capacity as critical readers, whatever our behavior in everyday life" (11).

Buell seems to want there to be a relationship between trees in literature and trees in the world closer than a relationship of mere semblance would be, whether that semblance is descriptive, iconic, or metaphorical and symbolic. Such, at least, is the trend of his rhetoric, which throughout his book reveals an inchoate and perhaps not fully conscious desire for a literature of presence.... If I follow Buell's arguments, this literature would be "environmental." It would evoke "the natural world through verbal surrogates," and would thereby attempt "to bond the reader to the world as well as to discourse." Most remarkably, it would enable the reader "to see as a seal might see." But why environmental literature should be deputized to make the presence and reality of the natural world available to us by proxy, when that world lies waiting to be explored by bookworms and bold adventurers alike, is a question insufficiently mooted in *The Environmental Imagination*, and in ecocriticism generally speaking. Devoting our time and energy to the perusal of environmental literature would seem to be a roundabout way for us to secure a bond with the earth: it's as if we should spend our time poring over the personal ads, instead of striking up a conversation with the lonely heart next door. (6-7)

Although Phillips is critical of Buell's emphasis on presence, he seems (oddly enough) equally skeptical of distance and indirectness themselves. While he may be right to criticize Buell's insistence on ecomimesis, he is too quick to dismiss the possibility of "[spending] our time poring over personal ads, instead of striking up conversation with the lonely heart next door." "Striking up conversation" is not a guarantor of presence, nor is "poring over personal ads" a needless form of indirection. The texts I address – like my insistence on the centrality of literature to ecocriticism (my belief that "criticism" need not be the ugly stepsister to the "eco") – suggest that casting these two modes of engagement as opposites in fact does more harm than good. The personal ad, after all, might be acknowledged as an alternate form of relation, one that in fact grants us access – not unadulterated access to another person (can such a relation ever be achieved?) but instead access to the *ways in which* we are proximate to or distanced from that other. It is, in other words, a form that helps us determine the terms of access themselves. If the presence of writing – the personal ad surrogate for the breathing human being – forces us to acknowledge mediation, and to see the relationality that distance can in fact yield, then literature may be the exact right place to begin a different kind of engagement with environmentality.

In keeping with this possibility, *Spinster Ecology* makes a case for literature in part by making a case for distance itself. As the examples above begin to suggest, the indeterminacy surrounding the relationship between text and environment has made ecocriticism a deeply conflicted field, whose practitioners are almost relentlessly self-conscious about the limitations of their own practice. As the examples presented in this section have demonstrated to varying degrees, ecocritics begin with a kind of defensiveness about our position as critics invested in ecological or environmental concerns, always anticipating, it seems, gently skeptical questions from hard scientists or environmental activists or – most perniciously – one another: Why look at literary texts (particularly fiction and poetry) if one is interested in the natural environment? What efficacy does literature possibly bear in the face of global warming? What political stakes can a quiet nineteenth-century novel possibly claim in a debate moving at twenty-first-century speed? What can the pages of a book possibly do besides aestheticize, distance, place us at a remove from the serious questions confronting our world today?

This project answers such questions not by denying or remediating the issue of distance but instead by acknowledging and engaging with it. For the distances at hand – between text and reader, between past and present, between fiction and “hard” fact, between literary representations and their (presumed) real-world referents – exist within and inform the central texts of this study themselves, particularly in their depictions of environmental and interpersonal relation alike. All of the authors whom I treat in this project are concerned with the ability of distance to constitute connection, engagement, and intimacy; all are invested, explicitly or implicitly, in a narrative or historiographical approach that presents our distance from the objects of our investment rather than overcoming it; all are committed to a form of spinsterly distance or anonymity or invisibility that we should neither desire to overcome nor consider a cheat.

One thing that literature does, that is to say, is make distance present, is make us aware of the limits of our quest to know. The authors whom I discuss in the chapters that follow are all interested in our engagement with and at these limits, are committed to representing the ways in which strangeness can burgeon and persist without becoming alien or alienating. To be entering the world – the natural environment, the social sphere, the terrain of history – through the pages of a book is not to be engaging in a reality by proxy but rather to have our attention called to the relations and distances that constitute worldly engagement as such. One thing that a literary study can do, then, is eliminate (or at least minimize) the illusion of direct access. This project thus widens the range of what we think can constitute the environment(al) – not so as to render the category of the environment so diffuse as to be meaningless, but so as to acknowledge how what we understand as place and nature and environment (both the idea of place, that is to say, and actual places themselves) already inscribe the question of our relation to them.

The readings that follow take seriously the possibility that our literature's contribution to environmentality may be found not in its nouns (which is also to say, not in its thematic representations of nature) but instead somewhere else – in its adverbs, its adjectives, its forms, its style, its tone. Morton has suggested that the “ality” of “environmentality” is where ecocritical investigation should focus its energies; to borrow his approach for a moment, I am suggesting that the “ness” of “literariness” may be deeply important as well.⁷⁰ If ecocriticism (as has been widely noted and analyzed⁷¹) has unfolded and evolved in waves, I am promoting a formalist turn, one informed but not strictly dictated by literary theory. As a result of my non-thematic, non-representational approach, nature “itself” features relatively rarely in these pages – and,

⁷⁰ Timothy Morton, “Edges, Margins, Silence.” ENL184-1 Fall, 2008 (UC-Davis). Podcast.

⁷¹ For useful overviews, see Lawrence Buell, “Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends” (*Qui Parle* 19.2 [Spring/Summer 2011]) and Greg Garrard, “Ecocriticism” (*The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory* 19.1 [2011] and 18.1 [2010]).

when it does, its appearance tends to be coincidental rather than central. Although all of the works that I read do attend – in varying ways and to varying degrees – to the natural world, and although the existence of that attention is a prerequisite for my having included them in this study, I choose to focus largely on other aspects of the texts, formal and thematic alike. However, as this discussion already has suggested, mine is not an *Ecology Without Nature* – at least not in the way that Morton means the phrase. “The main theme of the book,” he explains, “is given away in its title. *Ecology Without Nature* argues that the very idea of ‘nature’ which so many hold dear will have to wither away in an ‘ecological’ state of human society. Strange as it may sound, the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art” (1). Where Morton posits “ecology without nature” as a unitary object or entity (often as the subject of the sentence, where it comes to feel like a single compound noun), I am most interested in the preposition that links his two central terms. For a statement like “ecology without nature” seems to take for granted that we already know what it means to be “with nature” – and that “withoutness” can be readily recognized or achieved. And yet the texts that I take up radically complicate the meaning of terms like “with” and “without,” suggesting that companionship is perhaps not so easily defined or recognized - and, perhaps even more provocatively, that our ways of being without (or of being unaccompanied) are far more polyvalent than we typically understand them to be. In the case of “ecology without nature,” I would argue, we might be well served to wonder less about the object being jettisoned and more about the preposition ostensibly doing that work.

And rethinking withness, of course, also leads us to rethink withoutness – both as it is used by Morton and as it resonates beyond his argumentative confines. We might also ask, then, why the condition of being (in Nixon’s words) “uncoupled from worldly concerns” (a turn of

phrase, of course, that calls to mind Haskell's spinster, defined by "never having become one half of a pair," or Jewett's Mrs. Todd, "mateless and appealing" when viewed from a distance (131)) is necessarily associated with the antisocial, the apolitical, and the indifferent. For as this introduction has already begun to suggest – and as the readings that follow will aim to elucidate in far greater detail – distance and solitariness (these states of being uncoupled) need not be entirely separate from engagement. Instead, they may themselves constitute a newly ethical – a newly efficacious – political mode.

Such a claim likely would be met with skepticism by at least one of the most innovative and politically-minded ecocritics writing today. In *Slow Violence*, Nixon explicitly critiques formalism – or, more broadly, the aesthetic emphases of certain branches of literary studies – for being fundamentally (and dangerously) apolitical, a critique that queer theory often has shared:⁷²

When literary studies becomes uncoupled from worldly concerns, we frequently witness, alongside an excessive regard for ahistoric philosophy, an accompanying historically indifferent formalism that treats the study of aesthetics as the literary scholar's definitive calling. Questions of social change and power become projected onto questions of form so that formal categories such as rupture, irony, and bricolage assume an inflated agency through what Anne McClintock has called "a fetishism of form." ... These concerns have a direct bearing on the relationship between literary forms, forms of socioeconomic change, and environmental activism. Crucially, how do we as environmental scholars keep questions of political agency and historical change central in order to connect specialist knowledge to broader public worlds in which environmental policy takes shape and within which resistance movements arise? In this book, I have underscored those places where writers, by drawing on literature's testimonial and imaginative capacities, have engaged nonliterary forces for social change. Rather than displacing social agency

⁷² For more on queer theory's antiformalism, see Elizabeth Freeman's contribution to *After Sex?*, in which she reflects on the extent to which, according to a model that identifies "queer" as "a 'radically anticipatory stance'" (Berlant and Warner's phrase), "it seems that truly queer queers negate forms, and that formalism, particularly of the literary kind, isn't very queer" (30). My investment in form and formalism is in keeping with the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who, in "Queer and Now," argues that her "strong formalist investment didn't imply (as formalism is generally taken to apply) an evacuation of interest from the passionate, the imagistic, the ethical dimensions of the texts, but quite the contrary: the need I brought to books and poems was hardly to be circumscribed, and I felt I knew I would have to struggle to wrest from them sustaining news of the world, ideas, myself, and (in various senses) my kind.... And this doesn't seem an unusual way for ardent reading to function in relation to queer experience" (4).

onto anthropomorphized, idealized forms, I argue that any interest in form must be bound to questions of affiliation, including affiliation between writers and movements for environmental justice. (31-32)

Politics and form are treated, in Nixon's account, as disparate entities; to get from one to the other we must "projec[t]" questions of the latter onto questions of the former or "displac[e] social agency onto anthropomorphized, idealized forms." But what of the way in which the formal is already political and the political is already formal? Nixon's language acts as if the message can ever be separate from the medium; my project, however, is deeply invested in how messages (or meanings) emerge, how they fail to emerge, and how both processes – the becoming visible, the remaining invisible – occur. It is, in other words, as invested in conditions of emergence as it is in the objects and movements and people that emerge. And this is where literary form might indeed yield political ends – or, more precisely, political *modes*: in the pace of its unfolding, in its attention to detail, in the way that words and sentences and paragraphs yield meaning and resonance alike. Indeed, my own "specialist knowledge" – such that I have any, or such that I feel comfortable labeling it thus – has to do precisely with how literature achieves its effects, how it impacts and influences through its very form. When Nixon wonders "how to adjust our rapidly eroding attention spans to the slow erosions of environmental justice" (8), I can't help but think that answers might be found precisely in those aesthetic and formal readings that he too readily discredits.

Indeed, Nixon insists that "[t]o confront slow violence requires...that we plot and give figurative shape to formless threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and time.... To intervene representationally entails devising iconic symbols that embody amorphous calamities as well as narrative forms that infuse those symbols with dramatic urgency" (10) and that "[i]n a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative

writing can help make that unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses. Writing can challenge perceptual habits that downplay the damage slow violence inflicts and bring into imaginative focus apprehensions that elude sensory corroboration” (15). Although I agree deeply with the (implicit) sentiment that imaginative literature is important not for how it envisions utopian (or fantastical) solutions but rather for how it dwells just to the side of the reality, I don’t agree that the best solution is to make the slow dramatic or to make particular “unapparents” appear. This project is invested instead in the ways in which literature has the capacity to attune us to formlessness, slowness, and invisibility (“unappearance”) as such – a capacity that, if attended to, might equip us to respond to the paradigms of slow catastrophe in general rather than to the particular crises (and the particular forms of fallout) to which Nixon’s more thematic readings attend.⁷³

⁷³ At stake in this project is also the very notion of “crisis” itself. For an affirmative quietness (that seeks not to raise its volume) and an affirmative slowness (that seeks not to increase its speed or visibility) may seem to have little place amidst the intense, loud, and insistently directed rhetoric through which environmentalism, like so many other contemporary political movements, often conveys its message. But perhaps the solution to this impasse is not to figure out how to make regionalist texts louder, or more directed, or more explicitly political, but rather to envision how rethinking our attachment to the idea of crisis itself might help us acknowledge the contributions that these quiet, reticent genres might make – precisely in their quietness, precisely in their reticence – to our current situation. Ross advocates that we think in terms of “emergency” rather than “crisis” (261-262), a shift that we might theorize with the help of Rebecca Solnit’s remarkable work of art criticism, “Landscapes of Emergency,” *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2001). The fact that I am tempted to turn to a work focused on visual art is not coincidental; throughout this project, I am invested in non-narrative, relatively plotless, frequently suspended works of literature that – like the work of art, in Solnit’s words – “call for attendance, for waiting/paying attention to; they push the bodily act of consumption into a mental act of contemplation. The pervasive discomfort of present-day viewers of art is partly due to the lack of pace visual art sets. Visual art does not unfold in history like a film or a book; it is there all at once, and, having no rate of consumption, it throws the viewer back to her own rhythms or lack thereof, and so the act of viewing has no outward sign of completion” (268). Whereas crisis seems to demand either reactive (and typically transitive, directed) solutions – in Ross’s words, the imperative to “resolve the crisis” or to “find a solution”; in Solnit’s, the imperative to “directly intervene” – or somehow regressive behavior – these acts of “turning back” or of “returning to...older rhythms” – emergency (like the work of art) seems to permit, demand, and condition alternate forms of response. I will return explicitly to questions of crisis in my conclusion, and related questions will emerge subtly throughout all of the chapters that follow.

Slowness and Indirection: American Literary Regionalism

My investment in literary slowness and in minimal (or barely legible) happenings has led me back, time and again, to American literary regionalism, the genre around which *Spinster Ecology* revolves. Although only one of my central authors – Sarah Orne Jewett – is traditionally considered a regionalist, my readings of all of the texts in this project focus on dimensions of their tone, temporality, and modes of unfolding that resemble those of regionalist fiction in technique, even if they are not regionalist in name. In engaging the works I discuss, we confront the uncertain duration of the poetic line or the lyric poem. We attend to the non-linear unfolding and ephemerally seasonal cyclicity of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. We drift amidst the tendency of Thoreau's travelogue to suspend its own progress, pause over (or with) his account's tendency to pool like the eddies on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. We read Carson's insistently intransitive treatment of the future, and inevitably realize that what seems to "arrive" has in fact been in our midst for quite some time already. And then there are the authors whose muted, sometimes plotless, often recursive prose peeks into the corners of (and has inspired) this project: Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Mary Austin, Willa Cather, Rebecca Solnit: in one way, shape, or form, regionalists, all.⁷⁴

While my introduction thus far has focused on twentieth- and twenty-first-century political questions, the readings that follow settle largely within the mid-to-late nineteenth century, a fact attributable to my investment in regionalist fiction's slow pace and muted tone and minimal interest in event. (This is, in other words, less a project about nineteenth-century

⁷⁴ As this list begins to suggest, and as will become explicit in my conclusion, I am invested in reconsidering the bounds of regionalism and the question of the genre's own future. This too is a matter of spinsterliness: As Caroline Gebhard points out, in accounts like Robert Spiller's influential 1946 *Literary History of the United States* "Jewett...becomes the dead end to New England's local-color tradition. According to this official version, Jewett (a spinster) could have no heirs" ("Spinster in the House of American Criticism," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 10.1 [Spring, 1991], 18).

themes than about nineteenth-century forms.) Such formal traits are linked to the genre's attention to the spinsterly characters and ways of life;⁷⁵ scholars of regionalism have long connected the genre's plotlessness to its foregrounding and embrace of non-normative developmental trajectories. As Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse argue:

The requirement of plot had serious implications for what women were free to say in novels, since they were limited by what readers expected to find. Not surprisingly, these expectations, of what constitute plot and thus made a novel a novel were culturally conservative, privileging heterosexual romance and those female characters who could be imagined as participating in such a romance – young, unmarried, but marriageable, and excessively feminine, since the sexuality that formed the essence of plot was understood as the attraction of opposites and required intense gender differentiation to be convincing to readers. The discursive limits of the novel were therefore substantial where women were concerned, and indeed the novel proved to be a difficult forum for the articulation of nineteenth-century feminist questions since its conventions worked against the possibility of writing “any lives of women.”

...Once we leave the realm of plot and enter a region of narrative form that evades the visibility of the novel, it becomes possible for a writer to begin a story with two older women who are possibly single and certainly singular. Choosing a form that escapes plot, regionalist writers are free to center character, and since the sketch does not prescribe what kind of character can be centered (its story is not *the* story), regionalist writers become free as well to focus on a whole range of persons who would inevitably be marginalized in novels.⁷⁶

Fetterley's and Pryse's discussion requires a bit of unpacking; for embedded in their analysis are two interrelated but distinct points about regionalism, each of which seems worth considering in

⁷⁵ Not only did the post-Civil War American Northeast see a rise in the number of unmarried women (as Kathryn Kent points out in *Making Girls into Women*, “[g]overnment statistics from the 1880s indicated that one-third of the female population over twenty-one would never marry” (24)), but, as Naomi Braun Rosenthal argues, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked the period when the spinster enjoyed the highest social prestige that she has known in American history; able to take advantage of expanding women's rights without the burdens of domestic responsibility, not yet understood “as sexually repressed and emotionally bereft” (as she was post-World War I) or as “an exemplar of feminine failure” (as she was in the era of World War II), the late-century spinster represented “an alternate form of womanhood” (*Spinster Tales and Womanly Possibilities* [Albany: State U of New York P, 2002], 10-13). Heather Love challenges this rosy portrait of the late-century spinster in her own queer readings of Jewett, which I will discuss in Chapters One and Three. At this point in my discussion, I am less invested in the spinster's happiness (or lack thereof) than in her cultural visibility, and in her prevalence (which manifests itself both thematically and formally) within the literary canon produced around this time.

⁷⁶ Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, *Writing out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (Urbana & Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2003), 170-171, 172. Hereafter cited in the text.

some detail. One consequence of (and impetus for) regionalism's relinquishment of plot and embrace of forms like the sketch is an ability to attend to characters whose lives seem to offer little of interest to more traditional, plot-driven (we might say normative, heterosexual) narratives. Indeed, the aging spinster aunt (or uncle), the widow and widower, and the elderly bachelor, not exactly the traditional stars of the narrative show, are frequent centerpieces of the regionalist sketch; we need think here only of Aunts Roxy and Ruey in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Pearl of Orr's Island* (the text to which Fetterley and Pryse's discussion alludes), the spinsterly protagonist of Rose Terry Cooke's "How Celia Changed Her Mind," the sister-housemates of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "The Lost Ghost," or Jewett's own Mrs. Todd, Elijah Tilley, and Captain Littlepage.⁷⁷ And a related consequence (or impetus) is how much must happen – or, contrarily, how much need not happen – to the characters in the course of the story or sketch; regionalism's tolerance for (and embrace of) quiet eventlessness becomes another of its foundational characteristics.

Elsewhere in their discussion, Fetterley and Pryse argue that insofar as it "resists ... the circuits of heterosexuality and heteronormativity that ... plots embody and enforce..., the very form of regionalist fiction is queer" (316-317). *Spinster Ecology* begins with a similar presumption, but is informed by a broader definition of "form"; whereas Fetterley and Pryse focus almost entirely on the relationship between plotlessness and non-normative life trajectories, I am invested as deeply in the tone of these texts, in their modes of making time (and

⁷⁷ Extending our temporal bounds just a bit, we might think, too, of Willa Cather; Chris Nealon recounts how "In a 1937 *New Republic* essay, Lionel Trilling accused Cather of relying on myths of the land because she could not produce a heterosexual narrative: 'It has always been a personal failure of her talent that prevented her from involving her people in truly dramatic relations with each other. (Her women, for example, always stand in the mother or daughter relation to men; they are never truly lovers).' In one sense Trilling was right; it cannot really be said that Cather wrote dramatic fiction, if by that term we mean novels organized around a marriage plot" ("Affect-Genealogy: Feeling and Affiliation in Willa Cather [*American Literature* 69.1 (March, 1997)], 5.

persistence, and continuity) felt as such, in the careful attention they pay to the ways in which things (characters, memories, relationships) appear and disappear, emerge into and disappear from sight. (We might recall here Fetterley's and Pryse's comment that the narrative form of regionalism "evades the visibility of the novel.") I therefore locate regionalism's contribution to this project in its capacity (and, indeed, desire) to attend to the slow, often imperceptible unfoldings of everyday life: how day becomes night; how friendship burgeons between reticent companions; how the feeling of grief slowly lifts in the wake of death. My engagement with these characteristics, as is likely already clear, is not solely aesthetic but also ethical; regionalist texts – like the life trajectory of the spinster herself – promise to help us become attuned to happenings that never (or only belatedly) become legible as event, and to unfoldings too slow or too indirect to constitute a legible trajectory.⁷⁸

Fetterley and Pryse do attend to regionalist texts' slowness, but ultimately assimilate it into a model of closeness and intimacy, arguing that pace is part of how regionalist authors develop a mood of empathy and invite the reader into a community of women:

We are reminded once again of the emphasis Cary places in her "Preface" to *Clovernook* on "detaining" her readers in *Clovernook* long enough to see as *Clovernook* sees, and of the strategies of narration she employs in her fiction to allow a story simply to unfold so that we may become immersed in it. In further detailing what is required to be empathetic and to express empathy, [Arthur] Ciaramicoli connects the need to slow down with that "focus on the moment-to-moment experience" which constitutes the real "power of empathy" ...and the real work of being empathetic. (354)

⁷⁸ It might seem that I have overlooked regionalism's most direct point of contact with environmentalism: its investment in particular places, and local ways of life. (For an example of a work of ecocriticism that takes such an approach to regionalist writing, see Buell's discussion of Celia Thaxter's *Among the Isles of Shoals* in *The Environmental Imagination*, 233ff.) But that omission is deliberate. My investment in regionalism is less thematic or representational than formal and tonal; in fact, as I will argue in my first chapter, I am as interested in regionalism's capacity to de-localize and de-personalize as in its capacity to express investment in the particularities of a given physical environment.

Slowness here is understood at least in part as instrumental, designed to yield a particular end or aim: in this case, a kind of intersubjective (and transhistorical) connection. Indeed, slightly earlier in their book, Fetterley and Pryse suggest that “while regionalism does not in general employ the themes, stylistic features, or figurative conventions of sentimentalism, it does share its emotional and philosophical ethos, an ethos that [in Joanne Dobson’s words] ‘celebrates human connection, both personal and communal, and acknowledges the shared devastation of affectional loss.’ ...However, most regionalist fictions emphasize strategies and models for establishing and maintaining connection rather than ‘the shared devastation of affectional loss.’ In so doing, they demonstrate their interest in establishing a connection with their readers” (342). Not only is Fetterley and Pryse’s rhetoric insistently one of a “connection” that is definitionally and experientially opposed to “distance,” and not only are the affects related to this connection unequivocally strong (significantly stronger, I would argue, than the affects depicted in the texts themselves), but the nature of this intersubjective, transhistorical link is insistently linear and insistently normative, despite their emphasis on regionalism’s non-normative aims. Where Fetterley and Pryse cast the reader of regionalist fiction as symbolically being the “granddaughter [who] feels the ties, through her mother, to earlier generations of grandmothers and great-grandmothers,” *Spinster Ecology* asks what it means to read not as a granddaughter but as a niece, to understand our modes of literary inheritance and transmission as being more askance and less direct. In this project, I take regionalism, like spinsterliness, to be a fundamentally indirect genre, one whose many forms of (thematic, characterological, structural, stylistic, and tonal) distance need not be ameliorated by recourse to paradigms of closeness and direct inheritance, on the one hand, or of strong feeling, on the other.

Studies in Gentleness: A Note on Method

A final note, before this introduction comes to its close: If one aim of this project is to complicate the literary modes that we think of as being politically efficacious, to challenge our assumption that important political and theoretical interventions come about most readily through loud voices and direct activism and polemical forms, I seek to achieve this aim not only in my readings of my central texts' importantly muted tonality, but also in the way that my own prose and argumentation unfolds. In the introduction to *Intimacy in America: Dreams of Affiliation in Antebellum Literature*, Peter Coviello feels compelled to defend his attention to literary particularity:

If I have attended more assiduously than is now usual to the textual particularities that distinguish each author's work, it is not because I have wished to insulate them from their history but because that methodology has seemed to me best suited to the telling of this other, differently historical kind of history.... Primarily through the methods of close reading I have described, I have tried to attend as scrupulously as possible to the kinds of investments my three featured authors sustained in and toward the stuff of history...; and I have done so out of the conviction that such investments themselves *are* history, are the often occluded interior forces that work to give shape and texture to the broader movements we later fit into the governing abstractions and call by proper names....I have tried to suggest, first, that the very grammar and syntax, the particularities of form that characterize a particular author tell us immensely consequential things about that individual's relation to the notions, objects, and ideals that we will later come to think of as history; and second, that the particular intensities and obliquities of relation are, again, not exterior to history but the conditions of its emergence. So it has been to the contours of such obliquities, and to their diverse expressions, that I have tried to be most attentive.⁷⁹

It seems odd, quite frankly, that a literary critic would have to make a case for the centrality of literary texts to his project. But in the intellectual environment in which we currently find ourselves, "close" is one of the last descriptors we are likely to use for the kinds of analyses we perform; these days, we do queer readings or ecocritical readings or posthumanist readings. The

⁷⁹ Peter Coviello, *Intimacy in America: Dreams of Affiliation in Antebellum Literature* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005), 16-18. Hereafter cited in the text.

description of how (and why) we read has to more to do with where we position ourselves relative to a critical field than it does with where we position ourselves relative to a text. (This too, of course, is a question of relation.) “Queer” readings, for instance, are likely to be closer to a theoretical framework or political investment than they are to the particularities of syntax or diction or tone; their queerness, in other words, is more thematically based than it is a question of stance.⁸⁰ Often, this shift is not only understandable but important as well; we wouldn’t have such widely influential and widely applicable theories of literary queerness, ecopolitics, and environmentality if not for critics’ willingness to venture beyond the confines of a text and into the embodied, politicized, affective of and to which it often speaks. But here returns the dilemma that I spoke of above, specifically in relation to ecocriticism. For what happens to the extent to which our investments as critics are undeniably literary? And what happens to the wholeness of a book like *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (this project’s touchstone) when we seek to make it environmental, or when we seek to make it queer? When we look so pointedly at the intense homosocial bonds that the Dunnet Landing women share, what happens to the sea beside which they live? And when we look insistently at the sea (to which they’ve given their hopes, their fears, their brothers, their husbands), what happens to ways in which they love?

One of the most compelling works of Jewett criticism that I have encountered is the 1973 collection *Appreciation of Sarah Orne Jewett: 29 Interpretive Essays*, edited by Richard Cary and published by the press at Colby College, long both a repository for and champion of Jewett’s

⁸⁰ This has begun to change even within the timeframe during which I have been working on this dissertation. See in particular the special issue of *ESQ* (55.3:4 [2009]) entitled “Come Again? New Approaches to Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Literature,” particularly the contributions by Christopher Castiglia & Christopher Looby, Jordan Alexander Stein, and Heather Love, all of which address questions of style and aesthetics. These critics are inspired, both implicitly and explicitly, by the work of Sedgwick, as am I. If Sarah Orne Jewett is this project’s touchstone author, and Elijah Tilley its touchstone character, then Sedgwick is its touchstone critic.

oeuvre.⁸¹ As the title of the collection suggests, these essays take as their premise – and as their governing critical impetus – a level of admiration for “Miss Jewett’s” work. *Pointed Firs* is, to these critics, “delightful” (128), “unimprovable” (160), and “magical” (195); Jewett’s “relationship to her material [is] exceptional” (229); the task of the reader is to be “adequately responsive to all [the book’s] evocations” (169). The critics – as part of their own quest to be adequately responsive – are unabashedly autobiographical in their analyses; Mary Ellen Chase opens her essay with a parenthetical that collapses critical distance in favor of proclaimed emotional investment: “The writer of this article (who as a little girl of twelve gazed with shyness, awe, and wonder upon Sarah Orne Jewett, then a woman of fifty, in her old home at South Berwick, Maine, and who thirty years later had the incomparable privilege of talking at length and often with Miss Cather about *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, as well as about its author) knows from a life spent in college teaching how sound the criticism [that *Pointed Firs* is one of the three American books that has “the possibility of a long, long life”] actually is” (181). Compared to the awe and wonder within the parenthetical, and the sense of direct access enlivening its confines, the claim which brackets the autobiographical side note seems to fall flat. And yet, of course, no such rigid separation is intended. For the teacher who puts *Pointed Firs* on her syllabus and the woman who gazed bashfully at South Berwick’s most famous resident are one and the same. And the reader who finds Jewett’s writing “delightful” and the critic who seeks to rigorously account for its formal unity are as well.

In 2012, it’s doubtful that I could publish an article on Jewett entitled “Studies in Gentleness” (Clarice Short, 1957, *Western Humanities Review*), however deeply I believe that gentleness (perhaps of the Wordsworthian sort) may in fact be the most apt term for the various

⁸¹ Richard Cary, ed., *An Appreciation of Sarah Orne Jewett: 29 Interpretive Essays* (Waterville: Colby College Press, 1973). Hereafter cited in the text.

affective and stylistic vectors of Jewett's work – and however deeply (to include my own autobiographical interlude) that word has mattered in my own encounters with Jewett's book. (2001, scrawled in a journal, my written response to a first reading of *Pointed Firs*: "What do we care enough about to be gentle with?") But the lack of direct outlets for personal investment does not itself preclude the experience of that investment – or the extent to which investment remains a governing impulse for our work as critics. We discuss the texts we do for a reason – because we like them, because we hate them, because they speak to us in interesting ways and raise questions that we would like to answer. But the only outlet we have for our own investment, it seems, comes either through identity politics or political affiliation. *Pointed Firs* can come to resonate as an object of study because of how it speaks to the emotions of late-nineteenth-century queer experience, or because of the extent to which it can be read as a proto-feminist text, or because of the way in which its insistently homosocial bonds seem to anticipate the lesbian separatist communities of the twentieth century.⁸² As a critic, in other words, I appreciate *The Country of the Pointed Firs* for the extent to which it speaks me back to me. (Here, "me" need not simply denote identity; it can also incorporate a range of identity-based critical investments which intersect with or diverge from any given critic's personal identity in complicated ways.) Alternatively, *Pointed Firs* can become critically compelling because of the way in which it illuminates aspects of my own political or theoretical investments. Poor Joanna standing on the island, inaccessible to her former neighbors, perhaps only mockingly reached by the happy tones of the pleasure boat, becomes a figure for historically backward queerness.⁸³ (In other words: I believe that contemporary queer politics must not lose sight of the dark underbelly

⁸² For the sake of argument, I have kept these examples within a limited sphere of identity investments. There are of course innumerable other directions that identity-based readings of Jewett can take.

⁸³ This is one of Heather Love's arguments in *Feeling Backward*.

of historical queer experience in the name of “pride.”) Jewett’s celebration of the communicative potential of the natural world can serve to “illustrate [the] dangers” of “claiming that ‘nature speaks,’ or that, conversely, we have silenced it.”⁸⁴ (In other words: I believe that one challenge to a truly revolutionary ecopolitics is our continued reliance on anthropomorphic [and often Romantic] tropes of nature.) As this critic, in other words, I appreciate *The Country of the Pointed Firs* for the extent to which it speaks my claims back to me.

But what of the extent to which what *Pointed Firs* speaks is in part itself, is in part Dunnet Landing, is in part the movement of Jewett’s words on the page? What of the extent to which the investment of any literary critic is undoubtedly *literary* in nature? Isolating particular elements (not episodes so much as themes and threads and preoccupations) of *Pointed Firs* for critical attention often means failing to attend to those elements’ patterns of appearance on the ground that is Dunnet Landing, often means (to borrow Coviello’s terminology this time) failing to consider “the conditions of their emergence.” Heather Love concerns herself with Poor Joanna. Environmental critics concern themselves with Dunnet Landing’s landscape: its forests, its hillsides, its sea. But what of the way in which Poor Joanna herself resembles the sea? What of the way in which her stance toward society echoes or anticipates her stance toward its rocky shores? What are we to make of the process or existence of quiet resonance itself? What ultimately makes me dissatisfied with these cultural and political approaches to *Pointed Firs* is not that they deny me an outlet to express direct appreciation. That can happen elsewhere: in the classroom, in conversation, in the marginalia that make my editions a palimpsest of different selves at different moments of reading. Rather, what discomfits me is that, in their focus on

⁸⁴ Andrew McMurry, “‘In Their Own Language’: Sarah Orne Jewett and the Question of Non-human Speaking Subjects” (*ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 6.1 [Winter, 1999]): 5. Hereafter cited in the text.

distinct topical or thematic elements of Jewett's book, these critics elide the intratextual contexts that facilitate or make legible such elements. What I would like to champion here is that we "appreciate" not simply in its celebratory sense – "to esteem adequately or highly; to recognize as valuable or excellent; to find worth or excellence in" – but also in its more subtle valences – "to estimate aright; to perceive the full force of"; "to be sensitive to, or sensible of, any delicate impression or distinction."⁸⁵ Speaking for and as myself this time: I appreciate *The Country of the Pointed Firs* for what its particular mode of unfolding suggests for queer politics, for environmentality, for these more efficacious or worldly stances. And so too I appreciate it for the opposite reason: because of how a consideration of the questions surrounding queer politics and environmentality might help us differently attend to the unfolding of *Pointed Firs*.

Isolating aspects of Jewett's plot – excerpting the environmental ethos or the queer politics or the economies of seafaring – ultimately works against an understanding of her text as a whole.⁸⁶ In the 1973 volume, the critics' topic of choice is the text's "unity"; to account for Jewett's "art," as so many of them aim to do, is to account for how her sketches hang together despite the absence of a linear plot, of marked character development, or of occurrences

⁸⁵ "Appreciate," *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Second Edition 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford U P. 15 November 2010. <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>

⁸⁶ This conundrum is not a new one; within the 1973 volume itself, Hyatt H. Waggoner (in an essay entitled "The Unity of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*") says: "One can imagine literary historians treating [Jewett], with equal relevance, as a symptom of the continuance of the "romantic" idealization of the simple life, in direct line of descent from Wordsworth and his peasants; of the aesthetic reaction against an emerging megalopolitan mass society; of a nostalgic retreat from complexity to simplicity. But these ways of cataloging the book, though relevant and, in some contexts, helpful enough, tend to obscure the reason for the book's continuing vitality as a work of art" (163). If we change the list of historical readings to a list of politically-minded and identity-based cultural criticisms, Waggoner's statement holds equally true today. One trait common to the books I examine in this study is the way in which the reason for their emotional impact seems to elude description. Walter Hesford, for instance, says of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*: "There are studies of Henry David Thoreau's *A Week*... which begin to do justice to its structure, style, and import. Even the most astute and sympathetic critics have not, however, accounted, I think, for the power, the *impression* of the book, perhaps because they are generally preoccupied with its merits as a transcendental document" (1977, 515). I have taken this comment as inspiration for my second chapter.

sufficiently dramatic to rise to the level of event. Frequently the critics begin with a question that seems to come at least in part from their own experience of the book's inexplicable coherence and power, and then proceed with an analysis of the text in search of an answer. Warner Berthoff, for instance, asks:

What is it then in Jewett's *Pointed Firs* that does so command attention, that secures the impression not only of integrity but of significance (and so of the durability Willa Cather claimed for it)? The book, we observe, proceeds through a sequence of personal histories and personal encounters. Yet the specific events, one by one, are too slight to produce much more than anecdotal pathos; what gives them body and interest is their insistent revelation of a more general order of existence. Particular persons have been put sharply before us, yet our feeling for their lives, though warm enough, is curiously impersonal; our interest in them is less as personalities than as examples, as case histories. (158)

Here we see the move from the isolated or discrete elements of the text (the specific events, which happen "one by one," the "anecdotal pathos," the "sequence of personal histories and personal encounters") to something less distinct yet perhaps more powerful: to the way in which those events' "slightness" somehow becomes an "insistent revelation," to the way in which personal stories are given "body." The remarkable aspect of *Pointed Firs*, we seem to be told, is not any one aspect of the book but rather the lack of anything distinct to remark on, is not the various moments of the Dunnet Landing summer but rather the connective tissue between them, is nothing other than this feeling of wholeness and sufficiency that makes the book "enough."

The unity that most of the critics ultimately find is a matter of mood, emotion, or tone, is precisely some version or incarnation of this "enough." *Pointed Firs* coheres not because of anything that happens but because of *how* it happens (or *how* it fails to happen) – and because of how it feels to us to watch it (not) happen. When we move beyond Berthoff's reading and catalog the descriptors of Jewett's "art" in the volume more broadly, just as we cataloged the descriptors of Jewett's appeal, the list looks something like this: *Pointed Firs* is "curiously impersonal" (158) and "delicately indirect" (167); it "insists on nothing: it evokes" (169); it

“[employs] a limited palette, ... [works] in a subdued tonality” (191); it gives “a feeling of impermanence” (195). If these qualities have something in common beyond their sheer slightness, it is the extent to which they seem to be unharnessable, the degree to which they seem insistently non-instrumental, the way in which they only barely rise to the level of affirmative technique rather than being understood in terms of lack or absence or loss. It is the shared tenuousness and strength of the text’s connections –its sheer ability to only barely (yet still so remarkably) cohere – that the New Critics commit themselves to noticing, to analyzing, and, yes, to celebrating. In my own chapter on Jewett, for instance, I argue that *Pointed Firs* may in fact be the perfect ground upon which to consider how backwardness becomes a mode of relation at least in part because it gently refuses the affective resonance that [Heather Love] attributes to it. This is less a rebuttal of Love than an assertion about a dimension of Jewett’s work that Love does not attend to – the manner in which (or process by which) affect rises to the level of the legible, and the way in which it sinks back down again. In other words: Any attempt to harness *Pointed Firs* – including my own, in this project – must wrestle with the workings of the book itself, with this undeniable yet nearly inexplicable sense of unity, with the barely present affirmations which constitute its pages. Any attempt to make claims about or deriving from the text, that is, must also acknowledge and engage with these forms of gentle refusal (and radical reticence) which populate its pages.

This may be my own study in gentleness.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Or my own study *of* gentleness. I have been struck by how often this word has come up in my reading and my thinking about the authors of this project. To provide just one example: Mark Hamilton Lytle’s recent biography of Rachel Carson is called *The Gentle Subversive: Rachel Carson, Silent Spring, and the Rise of the Environmental Movement* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2007) – a title which itself plays on the way in which Carson was often dismissively called “gentle” in the press that surrounded the publication of *Silent Spring*. *Life* magazine’s coverage of the book’s attendant controversies, for instance, was called “The Gentle Storm Center,” and insisted on depicting Carson (both in images and in its language) in

In reading Love or McMurtry on Jewett, one can become attuned to elements of the text that (s)he had never before considered – this certainly has been the case for me. And yet the mode and register of *that attunement* belong distinctly to the contemporary critics, not to the late nineteenth-century author. Jewett is harnessed. She is invoked. She is not permitted to gently refuse. And what I miss is not the refusal but the gentleness; for Jewett's writing, like Dickinson's snow (to once again borrow that marvelous line of Sharon Cameron's), sometimes "gentles distinction out of existence." It is no coincidence that the workings of Jewett's book parallel the workings of Dickinson's weather. Here, as elsewhere, Jewett is atmospheric, ephemeral, environmental.

Ultimately, perhaps this comes down to a matter of tone, to the difference that gentleness – and gentling – makes. In the essay that *was* published as "Studies in Gentleness," Clarice Short explains the effect of *Pointed Firs* in terms that might have been borrowed from Jewett's text itself:

Mrs. Gaskell's *Cranford*, published in 1853, and Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, in 1896, have the distinction of being two of the least exciting and most delightful novels written in the nineteenth century. They afford a striking contrast to the novels publicly displayed at present for popular consumption, works whose titles are rarely less sensational than *Blind Date with Murder* and whose covers are enlivened with shapely bosoms and leveled guns. In these works of Gaskell and Jewett sexual passion seems nonexistent and violence is only an "old, unhappy, far-off thing." The people who inhabit these novels are curiously and lovably disembodied.

The characters are sometimes tenderly sad for old loves long lost. They visit each other and drink tea or eat clam chowder whether the setting is England or the Maine coast. They are sometimes in poor health. They sometimes even die. But all is done most quietly. The characters are transfixed in typical postures by art as are the figures on

insistently domestic, rather than scientific or professional, terms (*Life*, 21 October 1962). (For more on contemporary responses to Carson's gender, see Michael W. Smith, "'Silence, Miss Carson!' Science, Gender, and the Reception of 'Silent Spring'" (*Feminist Studies* 27.3 [Autumn 2001], 733-752).) Throughout this project, I – like Lytle – am interested in thinking through the political and affective *capacities* of gentleness, rather than treating it as a (distinctly feminine, or distinctly feminized) falling off from some greater sense or source of agency. I will remark on other instantiations of gentleness (and gentling) as they emerge organically in my discussion.

Keats's Grecian urn. The two novels and Keats's ode have something in common. All three works seem to have the power to create visions and to suggest a great deal of human experience that the works themselves do not describe. (128-129)

Although our contemporary critical sensibilities are likely to be troubled by the marked nostalgia and conservatism of the opening paragraph (its resistance to contemporary or popular fiction, its insistence on the disembodiment and non-sexuality of those texts' nineteenth-century counterparts), Short's language and stance alike, we can't help but notice, are strikingly Jewett-esque. In her insistence on the delight of the past relative to the burdens of the present, we hear an echo of Mrs. Fosdick's lament over "how times have changed; how few seafarin' families there are left! What a lot o' queer folks there used to be about here, anyway, when we was young, Almiry. Everybody's just like everybody else, now; nobody to laugh about, and nobody to cry about" (64). And in her quietly balanced prose – the pairing of "least exciting" and "most delightful" (which anticipates the equally balanced and almost comically non-dramatic options "drink tea or eat clam chowder") – we hear echoes of Jewett's own depiction of Poor Joanna's Shell-heap Island, its unexpected calm manifested syntactically through the structural balance of "hopelessness and winter weather" (82). And then there is the tone. Particularly to a twenty-first-century ear, Short's sentences seem almost radically unambitious. All seven sentences in her second paragraph unfold directly from subject to verb to object; this rote pattern is only minimally marked by the "sometimes" which gently disrupts the flow in three of the first four instances. And the verbs of those sentences comprise little other than a synecdochal representation of a Dunnet Landing life: "are," "visit," "drink," "eat," "are," "die," "is [done]," "are [transfixed]," "have," "have." The most dramatic of actions – to die – here, as in *Pointed Firs*, seems subsumed by its proximity to and kinship with the profound banalities entailed in persisting from one day to the next. Indeed, a catalog of Short's adverbs provides a gloss on the

-muted emotional register of Jewett's text, on the way in which happenings only barely rise to the level of event: "curiously," "lovably," "tenderly," "quietly"; "sometimes"; "sometimes"; "sometimes."

Like Jewett's text, Short's criticism plays with the way in which careful description can, in time, become critical acuity. What I appreciate about "Studies in Gentleness" is the degree to which it is accountable to (or gives an account of) Jewett's prose – and the extent to which meeting or visiting with Jewett becomes its critical mode. I would like to suggest that there is something admirable in the New Critics' reticence about staking a claim – particularly in staking a claim beyond the bounds of Jewett's text. And perhaps, too, there is something admirable about beginning precisely with investment – not in the form of simple emotional response but rather by articulating the ways in which the text *makes a claim on us*. Ultimately, if Jewett's text teaches us about a mode of objectless gaze – a waiting that grants us nothing other than its own dimensionality – then I'd like to suggest that there might be a critical mode (gentle, attuned to Jewett's tone and approach and "conditions of emergence") that has a similar non-instrumentality, a similarly self-contained dimensionality, a similar patience with its own mode of persisting and waiting alike. As Simone Weil suggests, "[i]n every school exercise there is a special way of waiting upon truth, setting our hearts upon it, yet not allowing ourselves to go out in search of it. There is a way of giving our attention to the data of a problem in geometry without trying to find the solution or to the words of a Latin or Greek text without trying to arrive at the meaning, a way of waiting when we are writing, for the right word to come of itself at the end of our pen."⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009), 63. Cited in Harold Schweizer, *On Waiting* (London & New York: Routledge, 2008), 72.

To say that I admire Short's essay for its reticence in making a claim is perhaps simply to suggest that we aim low, assert little, try not to make our critical incursions felt. That caveat noted, I would like to advocate a model that emulates the way in which her essay, like Jewett's text, leaves room for reticence, permits some things to remain unsaid, doesn't always attempt to harness or point or seize. In "Studies in Gentleness," compared to the work of contemporary culturally-minded scholars, we might say (to borrow Berthoff's ultimate assessment of *Pointed Firs*) that "less seems attempted." But it seems we might assent, too, to the end of Berthoff's sentence: "more is actually secured" (146). Securing – or security – is perhaps no longer our critical aim; we don't necessarily think in terms of proof; definitiveness is not our aspiration. And, indeed, if to secure means to cordon off, to place behind glass, to accompany with a guard who permits only certain kinds of contact (the disembodied, the ephemeral, the easily-erased; like in our National Parks, the precondition of our engagement is that we promise to "leave no trace"), then it seems both inevitable and necessary that we move beyond this critical mode (itself now a bygone curiosity). *Pointed Firs*—as-Grecian-urn is a relic, untouchable, idealized. It is hermetic and taken out of circulation. It becomes something at which we gaze longingly, and perhaps reverently, but never touch. Likewise, the criticism itself becomes hermetic, insular, self-referential. The essays in *Appreciation of Sarah Orne Jewett* speak almost exclusively to one another. They speak about *only* Jewett's text (and a small number of other texts and authors who could be said to travel in the same circle). They grant wholeness so as to complete a circuit, so as to close, so as to render intelligible. Close reading, we know, always has the potential to become narrow reading, or closed reading; one of the first things Coviello does in explaining his own reliance on such methods is to defend himself against charges of insularity. Yet the challenge of a criticism predicated on politics or cultural studies is that it is too little hermetic, that it has no

patience for the kind of insularity or immersion that may in fact be a necessary prerequisite to understanding a text on and through its own terms. And if to secure means also to learn or to achieve, then perhaps the “less...less” structure of Berthoff’s claim is precisely a place to begin.

So in what follows – pages and chapters and claims – I attempt to practice a form of gentle criticism. This is, for me, in part a matter of tone: like Coviello, my sense of what I do in my own work is to “attend” to the texts at hand, to wait with their unfolding, to see what they suggest when I suggest little to them first. I have read *Pointed Firs* many times in the decade since it was first assigned to me, and each time, of course, new elements of the text have unfolded before my eyes: to make such a claim is little more than a literary or readerly commonplace. But what has been remarkable is the consistency with which such elements have appeared in a kind of relief against the backdrop of the text. In other words, *what* I see is not always the same; *how* I see what I see (the conditions of that *what*’s emergence) repeats time and time again. Here, then, if I attempt to harness anything, it is this process of unfolding. And if I try to freeze or magnify anything, it is precisely the kind of connective tissue that the New Critics revere: how things happen, how things fail to happen, how things come to (dis)appear. My treatment of relation, then, is not limited to the interactions within the texts – among characters, between characters and their environments – but also extends to the conditions of my own reading, to my own consistent relation to many of these texts. That consistency, I suggest, is a function of the texts’ mode of operating, unfolding, and structuring response.

Gentle criticism is also a question of focus – its object and practice alike. As I talk about the conditions of appearance and disappearance, I do so in a mode attentive to (and perhaps itself reminiscent of) the ambient and atmospheric qualities of the text. In practice, this means that rather than determine an angle or approach with which to cut through the text – to trace the

through-line of queer affect, to constellate the scenes of environmental attention into a kind of proto-ecological ethic, to map Dunnet Landing based on evolving patterns of seafaring commercialisms – I attend to the texts’ own patterns of expansion and diffuseness, their own non-linear structures, their own simultaneous ability and reluctance to fully cohere. When I analyze moments of queer affect or environmental attention, I do so within these broader patterns; as a result, the chapters that follow do not track a trajectory through Jewett, Thoreau, and Carson but instead perform close (though not closed) readings of each, united through their mode of attunement (and their attention to the texts’ own modes of attunement.) I am invested in understanding not only how these texts speak to each other (although my initial interest was certainly almost entirely within this relational mode, and traces of that productively persist) but also how they speak within themselves, how they achieve a kind of unity that, rather than simply sanctioning the hermetic circuits of New Criticism, allows them to open onto the world in more rigorous and more persistent ways.

What this means for the work that follows is that each chapter primarily performs a reading of the texts at hand – one attuned to questions of tone, event, and character alike. My understanding of affect and environmentality in these works stems not simply from particular episodes or even particular kinds of episodes, but also from how episodes cohere (or don’t), how particularities of character and events and tone come to be legible within the context of the texts as a whole. By and large, I make claims not about the text but rather from them. I do not seek a through line. What I seek is something more akin to a cloud, a fog, an atmosphere – and a mode of being oriented *within* it rather than a mode of piercing through it.⁸⁹ As Weil suggests, I attempt to give my attention to the problems that the texts offer without necessarily trying to

⁸⁹ This metaphor is not incidental; many of the readings that follow are invested in tracing the atmospheric qualities of the authors’ own writing.

arrive at the solution. I wait while I write. And like Jewett's eccentric seafarers – Captain Littlepage, who sits before a window, “watching for some one who never came” (88), and Elijah Tilley, who spends his days keeping watch for his dead wife, the “poor dear” who (as we have seen) will never come – I engage in a practice that is about not end but persistence, that by definition can't be completed but only somehow confirmed and continued, “curiously,” “lovably,” “tenderly,” “quietly.” Ambiently. Queerly. Gently.

CHAPTER ONE:
“REMOTE AND ISLANDED”: RELATIONAL INTRANSITIVITY IN
SARAH ORNE JEWETT’S *THE COUNTRY OF THE POINTED FIRS*

This chapter began less as a directed or unified argument than as my own set of sketch-like visits with Jewett’s Dunnet Landing. In many respects, I started where those New Critical readers of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* so unabashedly stood fifty years ago: in the realm of admiration, awash in my own experience of reading. I strove to understand how this book kept enticing me back to its pages without ever engendering a desire for more than it yielded; like those critics whose essays are included in *An Appreciation of Sarah Orne Jewett*, I wanted to develop a language for why and how it all became “enough.” And like the book’s own narrator, whose encounters with Dunnet Landing come through the interlocked stories and memories of its residents, I let myself be led from one character to another through a pattern of associations, some more tenuous than others. I lingered with the narrator, whose persistent anonymity other critics have treated either as a source of readerly desire or as a narratological cheat, but whose failure to appear I’m able to understand only as a more constitutive invisibility that suggests something about our patterns of relation themselves. I sat with Elijah Tilley, the retired seafarer whose days are filled by and experienced through the objectless watch that he keeps for his dead wife, the “poor dear.” I wondered at the friendship that these two characters (the one persistently anonymous, the other persistently distracted) develop with each other, perplexed by how few of our familiar criteria for that form of relation it fulfills and yet how insistently it seems to warrant the term nevertheless. I thought about the slow, thick way that time in the book both passes and makes itself felt. I pondered (as many critics have before me) the absence of children in Dunnet Landing, and wondered how to account for the odd lack of trepidation about death evinced by a cast of characters as elderly as Jewett’s. Amidst it all, I was companioned by the ambient

environmentality of *Pointed Firs*: by the “balm and sage and borage” in Mrs. Todd’s yard, crushed underfoot, their scent wafting through open windows (3); by the “noise of the water on the beach below” the schoolhouse (21); by the muted sound of “the shy whippoorwills singing [at] night” (55); by the distanced sight of the “darker green of the sweet fern...scattered on all the pasture heights” as the narrator sails away from Dunnet Landing at summer’s end (133).

Although such ambient dynamics perhaps seem distinct from the thematic, characterological, and structural considerations with which I began, I’d like to suggest that Jewett’s descriptions of environmental phenomena are not background or filler or rhetorical embellishment but instead become a model for the alternate paradigms of relation that circulate throughout the book, for this way of being with others that involves being environed by them more than it does interacting directly or *directedly* with them. The longer I sat with the episodes that interested me, the more I came to realize that they all concern themselves in one way or another with objectlessness: from the nameless narrator, whose anonymity ensures that we attend to what it means to relate to a stranger *as* stranger (or, in other words, what it means to attend to relation itself rather than the object thereof), to the mourning seafarer Elijah Tilley, whose objectless watch becomes a form of non-dyadic companionship that another’s presence can simply confirm, not disrupt or affect, to the temporality of the book as a whole, where time is understood not in terms of the events that fill or punctuate it but rather through the patterns of watch and attention that grant it its thickness and mediacy (that allow time to be felt as such), the book’s modes of relation all occur within an intransitive register. By taking seriously such paradigms, Jewett’s text quietly suggests an ecological and interpersonal ethic predicated less on such transitive actions as saving, preserving, and protecting than on their intransitive counterparts. Although many critics (environmentally minded and otherwise) have read *Pointed*

Firs as conservative in its preservationist leanings, I would like to suggest that we understand Jewett's emphasis as falling not on what it means to save (a fading culture, a cherished environment, a tenuous relationship) but on what it takes, instead, to persist or endure or survive.

This emphasis on intransitivity may in turn help to explain what my introduction identified as a unifying force of *Pointed Firs*: its sense of slightness, its indirectness, the remarkable ability that it has to remain unharnessed, to only barely (yet still so remarkably) cohere. For intransitivity is, by definition, the phenomenon of being without object, and hence without marked direction. Whereas a transitive verb engenders a vector-like relationship between subject and object, its intransitive counterpart simply lingers. Without the gravitational pull of an object, the verb can wander - perhaps becoming like the saunterer in Thoreau's "Walking," who by being home nowhere may be at home everywhere. And it is in the polydirectionality of its wandering, or in the many ways that its characters find to persist (to remain, to live, to die, to relate), that the remarkable interest and subtlety of *Pointed Firs* lies. Through its muted portraits of small-town life and loss, the book becomes a portrait of environmental relation – of the ways in which its characters relate to the environment, yes, but also of the extent to which they relate to one another ambiently and environmentally. In the Dunnet Landings' relationships, affect hovers rather than attaches, connection is more likely communal than dyadic, and impersonal attention replaces directed personal investment. In sum, what we find is a paradigm that demonstrates what relation can be apart from the objects to which it so frequently directs or attaches itself.

The pages that follow trace the contours of this intransitivity in various scenes from and various narratological facets of Jewett's book. My readings are necessarily episodic in nature, visiting with Dunnet Landing's residents and byways, much as does the narrator, becoming

immersed in (to borrow F.O. Matthiessen's words on the book) "the atmosphere that seems to detach from [these characters'] rusty corduroys and the folds of their gingham dresses."¹ Ultimately, they aim to attend to – and develop a lexicon for – the extent to which this book is atmospheric to its very core, for the way in which ambient concerns not only unify the sketches that comprise *Pointed Firs* but also become paradigmatic of its modes of interpersonal and environmental relation alike.

Remaining Anonymous, Becoming Strange

In her introduction to the Penguin edition of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Alison Easton observes that "the novel is full of characters familiarly mentioned even if we never meet them."² She is speaking of figures like Poor Joanna, the hermetic woman who dies long before the narrator arrives in Dunnet Landing – but whom the narrator comes to know (and hence, Easton seems to imply, whom we come to know) through a combination of narrative and pilgrimage. One implication here is that what lies in the background – spatially, temporally, perceptually – need not be considered insignificant, that the bounds of familiarity can extend to those entities typically considered either unknowable or not worth knowing. And yet Easton's formulation, focused as it is on the potential for acquaintanceship, raises an interesting question, one neither asked nor answered in the course of her discussion: If, within the unusual interpersonal register of *Pointed Firs*, we can know characters whom we never meet, is it also possible that we may remain strangers with those whom we do?

¹ F.O. Matthiessen, *Sarah Orne Jewett* (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1965), 149. Hereafter cited in the text.

² Alison Easton, "The Country of the Pointed Firs: History and Utopia," *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1996), xi. Hereafter cited in the text.

Or, to put the questions a slightly different way: What does it mean within the lexicon of this book “to know” a character? And, once presented, what does it take for a character to remain unknown, or to become strange? Such questions center on the text’s anonymous narrator, who is both the conduit for the knowledge that we receive about so many of Dunnet Landing’s residents (past and present) and herself the most oblique figure in the book. Like many of its counterparts in nineteenth-century regionalist fiction, *Pointed Firs* depicts a first-person female narrator’s summer in a rural community whose way of life represents a stark departure from the unnamed city she has left behind. We do not know her name, her age, her background, her point of origin, her destination upon departing Dunnet Landing, or even her motives for being there in the first place. And yet through her practice of exploring Dunnet Landing, coming to know its residents, and listening to their stories, we get a fairly thorough portrait of the town itself.³ At a basic level, there is asymmetry here: we see much of Dunnet Landing; we see little of the narrator. The complication comes when we attempt to identify the terms of this “seeing little”: How it is constituted, why it persists, and what it achieves.

Readings of the narrator’s persona tend to go in one of two directions: either magnifying the few details provided about her and heavily weighting their interpretive importance, or, alternatively, allowing her anonymity to persist and aligning it with questions of tourism and class. Sandra Zagarell, Richard Brodhead, and others have read the narrator’s self-effacement as a sign of bourgeois privilege; she need not appear, they argue, because the clout of her class

³ In an earlier formulation of this assertion, I argued that “we get a fairly *complete* portrait of the town itself.” I have since backed away from that term. One thing that interests me about *Pointed Firs* is how it creates a sufficiency that is not the same as a completeness, how it presents repeated incarnations of partialness and tenuous connection without making that partialness and tenuousness seem like a cheat.

gives her ready access to all the quaintness that New England tourists seek.⁴ And yet these readings, familiar though they are, depend on understanding the text's anonymous voice as unproblematically transparent, as if the lack of information about the narrator necessarily renders her perspective normative or empirical. Yet in a narrative structure where acquaintance is made in deeply subtle ways, it seems important to wonder about our lack of acquaintance with the unnamed narrator, important not to take transparency itself for granted. In a novel that redefines so much about community and friendship – but also so much about what defines a stranger – the accessibility (or lack thereof) of the narrating identity seems a crucial element in Jewett's portrayal of intimacy. Even if we accept the notion that the narrator's relative invisibility enables her integration with the Dunnet Landing community – the process of her becoming familiar, one could say – I would like to argue that this same trait highlights our readerly (or narratological) distance from her – the process, on the contrary, of her becoming strange.

⁴ Such readings tend to emphasize the narrator's ascription to the conventional practices of tourists and writers (or tourist-writers) alike; she is the "observer" who effortlessly becomes the "participant-observer," fulfilling her narrative role as pilgrim to the "authentic" and her narrating role as interested ethnographer with equal ease. If Jewett's narrator is anonymous, they assert, if she discloses far less than she consumes, generic convention and tourist norms are to blame; in *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 1993), Brodhead explains that "through this one-sided (and quite wishful) process of exchange, a life initially not the narrator's becomes her sympathetic possession; and when she has acquired enough of this life, it becomes strangely abstractable, generalizable, and portable... [C]arrying the good of the place *out* of the place – indeed, reprocessing it just for such exportation – is essential to this book's plan" (148). In this case, the little we know about the narrator is not only unremarkable, but sufficient as well; Brodhead argues that while "the asymmetrical characterization scheme practiced in *Pointed Firs* effaces this narrator and her home world as it glorifies Maine coastal folk, ...the few facts we learn tell very efficiently where this unnamed speaker comes from" (145). For Brodhead, these "few facts" are sufficient because to know the narrator (or, perhaps, to understand her narrative function [for more on the distinction between these two positions, see Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*]) means mainly to recognize her cultural role; for me, the same "few facts" are sufficient not because of a supertextual explanation (i.e. she is a tourist) but rather because of how the withholding of information constitutes a form of visible invisibility and in turn reveals or becomes the structure of relation. We need not know more about her, I will argue, because her role is as much medial as it is characterological, because she is in these pages as much to demonstrate something about relation as to be a fully drawn persona.

But before we step more deeply into *Pointed Firs*, it seems worth considering just how this notion of becoming-strange can come about narratologically. An elucidation as remarkable for its brevity as for its insight can be found in the discussion of Velasquez's painting *Las Meninas* that opens *The Order of Things*. There, Michel Foucault analyzes the portrayed artist's offset position relative to the canvas on which he is poised to paint:

His dark torso and bright face are half-way between the visible and the invisible: emerging from that canvas beyond our view, he moves into our gaze; but when, in a moment, he makes a step to the right, removing himself from our gaze, he will be standing exactly in front of the canvas he is painting; he will enter that region where his painting, neglected for an instant, will, for him, become visible once more, free of shadow and free of reticence. As though the painter could not at the same time be seen on the picture where he is represented and also see that upon which he is representing something. He rules at the threshold of these incompatible visibilities. The painter is looking, his face turned slightly and his head leaning towards one shoulder. He is staring at a point to which, even though it is invisible, we, the spectators, can easily assign an object, since it is we, ourselves, who are that point: our bodies, our faces, our eyes. The space he is observing is thus doubly invisible: first, because it is not represented within the space of the painting, and, second, because it is situated precisely in that blind point, in that essential hiding-place into which our gaze disappears from ourselves at the moment of our actual looking. And yet, how could we fail to see that invisibility, there in front our eyes, since it has its own perceptible equivalent, its sealed-in figure, in the painting itself?... The tall, monotonous rectangle occupying the whole left portion of the real picture, and representing the back of the canvas within the picture, reconstitutes in the form of a surface the invisibility in depth of what the artist is observing: that space in which we are, and which we are.⁵

On first encounter, this passage seems simply to suggest a paradigm of sight in which Velasquez's painter (or, perhaps, Velasquez *as* painter) cannot simultaneously see and be seen, or cannot visually represent and be visually assimilated or represented. These possibilities, it appears, make up the "incompatible visibilities." And yet Foucault draws the axis of incompatibility not simply *upon* the painting's plane of representation but also transversally *across* it – out from the painted scene and onto the act of viewing itself. Thus Foucault's register

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 3-4. Hereafter cited in the text.

shifts dramatically, moving us from a scene that we can imagine inhabiting – an accessible world within the painting – to a scene that is just that – a scene: a still painting, the object of a gaze. And, indeed, Foucault goes on to speak not of multiple (and mutually exclusive) visibilities but of multiple (and mutually constitutive) *invisibilities*; the first “invisibility” in question, it seems, exists exclusively upon the plane of representation: if the painter returns to his work, he will be blocked from view by his canvas. The second “invisibility,” however, seems not to be not that of a particular object blocked from view but rather something more fundamental. “Our gaze disappears from ourselves at the moment of our actual looking” in a manner radically distinct from the withdrawal of the painter behind the canvas, for unlike the artist, who can reappear, our gaze can never become visible to us. And yet this invisibility of the gaze, immanent to the act of viewing, does have a kind of objective correlative or perceptible equivalent within the painted scene: the back of the canvas, toward which there is nothing for us to do but look, looms in *Las Meninas* as reiteration, simply, of the fact *that* we see.

The narrator of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* functions similarly as a figure for an anonymous gaze, in whom we can begin to conceive how invisibility is made visible in its own dimension, depth, and mode of becoming. Jewett’s novel frequently ties the intertwined questions of strangeness and familiarity to paradigms of sight; indeed, the experience of sight in *Pointed Firs* rarely depends on what is being seen – rather the act of looking simply persists, a watch without an identifiable aim, a gaze without precise bounds, a glance defined by duration and magnitude rather than end. Throughout the text, the narrator’s attention often lingers not simply on acts of sight but rather on *failures of sight*, on those instances in which forms of invisibility govern viewing itself. When she first meets Captain Littlepage, for instance, she hears his story of the “waiting place,” a mysterious realm near the Arctic Circle. This narrative,

importantly, is multiply deflected; it not only speaks of intermittently visible bodies in a far-off and virtually unimaginable place, it also doesn't represent Captain Littlepage's own experience. Instead, it is a tale borrowed from Gaffett, a man he encountered on his travels, that Captain Littlepage shares with the narrator here. Speaking of the men aboard Gaffett's ship, he says:

"They...found inhabitants; 'twas an awful condition of things. It appeared, as near Gaffett could express it, like a place where there was neither living nor dead. They could see the place when they were approaching it by sea pretty near like any town, and thick with habitations; but all at once they lost sight of it altogether, and when they got close inshore they could see the shapes of folks, but they could never get near them, - all blowing gray figures that would pass alone, or sometimes gathered in companies as if they were watching. The men were frightened at first, but the shapes never came near them." (25)

The oddness of this passage comes not from how many things are seen but rather from how many things are lost to sight – and in how many different ways. The phrase “lost [to] sight” could serve as a subtitle to *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, a text whose characters are determined to keep looking even when there is seemingly nothing left to see. And yet disappearance operates in the text not as an engenderer of melancholy, but rather as a mode of encounter. The inhabitants of the waiting place, “thick” in their dwellings and “gathered” in their companies, consolidate a *figure*, precisely, for what it means *not* to be able to see. The passage catalogs the ways in which we articulate things we glimpse but can neither define nor name – shapes that figure into an ambient haze which resembles, without ever becoming, what we already know how to see. The “waiting place,” whose title has often been interpreted as reversing the paradigms of retrospection that dominate *Pointed Firs* in favor of a kind of wary anticipation, looms instead as a precarious suspension of both epistemological certainty and relational possibility.⁶

⁶ Similarly, the final paragraphs of the novel are replete with bodies and landscapes and various forms of the recognizable disappearing from view. The final chapter, entitled “The Backward View,” concludes:

When we think of this suspension of certainty and relation, we inevitably return to the narrator herself – to the way she goes (un)seen by us. Indeed, from the very first page of *Pointed Firs*, the narrator’s presence becomes aligned with paradigms of visibility and invisibility. The book opens with a game of hide and seek, a form of structural play that provides glimpses of a narrating persona without allowing us to identify (or identify with) her. The narrator is introduced not as the first-person presence who persists throughout the rest of the novel but instead initially as an impersonal assessment neither embodied nor granted an identity (“There was something about the coast town of Dunnet Landing which made it seem more attractive than other maritime villages of eastern Maine” [1]), and subsequently as the object of a third-person

Now and then [Mrs. Todd] stooped to pick something, - it might have been her favorite pennyroyal, - and at last I lost sight of her as she slowly crossed an open space on one of the higher points of land, and disappeared again behind a dark clump of juniper and the pointed firs....The little town, with the tall masts of its disabled schooners in the inner bay, stood high above the flat sea for a few minutes then it sank back into the uniformity of the coast, and became indistinguishable from the other towns that looked as if they were crumbled on the furzy-green stoniness of the shore. The small outer islands of the bay were covered among the ledges with turf that looked as fresh as the early grass; there had been some days of rain the week before, and the darker green of the sweet-fern was scattered on all the pasture heights.... Presently the wind began to blow, and we struck out seaward to double the long sheltering headland of the cape, and when I looked back again, the islands and the headland had run together and Dunnet Landing and all its coasts were lost to sight. (132-133)

This incremental retreat, wherein objects first blend into one another (“the little town...sank back into the uniformity of the coast, and became indistinguishable from the other towns...,” “the islands and the headland had run together...”) before fading from view entirely (“Dunnet Landing and all its coasts were lost to sight”), echoes or parallels the myriad other examples of bodies “lost to sight” in the text – with an important difference. The moment of Dunnet Landing’s disappearance itself disappears, elided from the text because of the narrator’s act of looking away. The moment of erasure is itself erased; we encounter Dunnet Landing in the book’s final sentence as a place already lost, moved from the register of the disappearing to the register of the disappeared, or the irretrievably remote, or the no-longer-accessible. Interestingly, we have access here neither to the final horizon of Dunnet Landing’s diminishing visibility (the moment at which it transitions from distantly legible to entirely invisible) nor to the sight that replaces it. We have no sense of what the narrator is seeing in the moments when Dunnet Landing disappears; the final terms of her inaccessibility come in the form of a vision we do not see, or a missing whose terms we cannot access. Importantly, it is not she who sees nothing in that moment but *we* who do not; like Foucault’s (or Velasquez’s) outermost watcher, we – readers, surrogate visitors, those trying to understand the narrator’s complicated anonymity – complete the paradigm of invisibility through what we see of the narrator-as-seer, through what we see of her sight – and, more importantly, through what we miss of both.

narrator's – and an entire town's – visual attention, as a “single passenger” who “landed upon the steamboat wharf” one evening in June. “The tide was high,” we are told, “there was a fine crowd of spectators, and the younger portion of the company followed her with subdued excitement up the narrow street of the salt-aired, white-clapboarded little town” (2). This impersonal gambit continues in the second chapter, as the narrative moves through a series of passive formulations (“Later there was only one fault to find with this choice of a summer lodging-place” [3], “the discovery was soon made that Mrs. Todd was an ardent lover of herbs” [3], etc.) before tentatively introducing the first-person persona in a gesture of relationality: “my landlady professed such firm belief as sometimes to endanger the life and usefulness of worthy neighbors” (4). And once the “I” itself emerges shortly thereafter – “My hostess and I had made our shrewd business agreement on the basis of a simple cold luncheon at noon” – it does not persist; the voice of that very sentence shifts back to third person and the perspective no longer seems to coincide with the visitor's – “and liberal restitution in the matter of hot suppers, to provide for which *the lodger might sometimes be seen hurrying down the road*, late in the day, with cunner line in hand” (6, my emphasis). Yet what returns when the “I” disappears, of course, is a paradigm of sight.

This rhythm of back and forth, approach and withdrawal, emergence and disappearance (which vacillate so insistently as to come to seem oddly non-differentiable – or somehow mutually constitutive), persists throughout the paragraph, finally concluded by a gesture of emergence that comes through a gesture of retreat:

In taking an occasional wisdom-giving stroll in Mrs. Todd's company, and in acting as business partner during her frequent absences, I found the July days fly fast, and it was not until I felt myself confronted with too great pride and pleasure in the display, one night, of two dollars and twenty-seven cents which I had taken in during the day, that I remembered a long piece of writing, sadly belated now, which I was bound to do. To have been patted kindly on the shoulder and called “darlin’,” to have been offered a

surprise of early mushrooms for supper, to have had all the glory of making two dollars and twenty-seven cents in a single day, and then to renounce it all and withdraw from these pleasant successes, needed much resolution. Literary employments are so vexed with uncertainties at best, and it was not until the voice of conscience sounded louder in my ears than the sea on the nearest pebble beach that I said unkind words of withdrawal to Mrs. Todd. (7)

The first action that the narrator relates in her own voice is one of withdrawal, of stepping back, of fading away; the activities denoted (“to have been patted kindly,” “to have been offered a surprise,” “to have had all the glory...”) are both syntactically and figurally subordinate to the act of renouncing them. We know of past occurrences only through their passive traces; just as we missed the narrator’s first sojourn in Dunnet Landing, so too do we here miss “the July days” that come to matter only insofar as their routines must be eschewed. The memory of belated writing – itself a kind of double deferral – necessitates the narrator’s retreat from the company of her host, to which she soon returns, and from our view, to which she never does. Whereas “the lodger might sometimes be seen hurrying down the road” and the “single passenger” can be “followed with subdued excitement” up it, the persistently anonymous narrator is lost to our sight. The narrative remains in the first person from here on; with the emergence of the ‘I’ comes the disappearance of the descriptions that have allowed us to see the traveler figure, however tentatively, however obliquely, at the novel’s start. And yet in part because we began by glimpsing her, her (relative) invisibility throughout the rest of the book makes her seem oddly akin to the unintelligible shapes of the waiting place, who, later in Captain Littlepage’s story, “[flutter] away out o’ sight like a leaf the wind takes with it, or a piece of cobweb” (25). Like them, she is a figure known by – and for – the ways in which she cannot be not seen. By linking the narrator’s visible invisibility to the ghost-like figures of the Waiting Place, I do not mean to suggest that she is a positive mystery, or involved in the preserving of mystery. Rather than constituting a transparent subject position through whom we see, Jewett’s narrator complicates

the dimensions of encounter itself. We do not know what or who the narrator is; we simply know *her watching*. The limits of representation thus *become* the strange “character” of the narrator; in fact, part of her strangeness is that she is not only a character in the sense of personage but also the character of a kind of intimate onlooking.

The invisibility of *Pointed Firs*, then, is not that of an object but that of a process – not the mystery of a narrator but the exhibition of sight and narration as such. If towns and people and landscapes are, in this book, lost *to* sight, then its narrator is, perhaps we could say, lost *as* sight. The book’s narrated figures are liable to disappear, like Velasquez’s painter, stepping behind the canvas on which he paints; each partakes in the invisibility that comes from obstruction or loss. But what I’ve been trying to suggest is that the mode of *communicating* these forms of obstruction – the narrator’s presence, her voice, the character that we think she is – becomes that transversal line, leading our gaze to the back of the painter’s canvas. Her invisibility – and, indeed, its very inconspicuousness, the way in which we can read the book quite seamlessly without acknowledging it at all – comes to reveal the way in which strangeness permissibly and perhaps even necessarily persists at the heart of intimacy and of community alike.

Anonymous Affects

Considering the *Pointed Firs* narrator not as a character to whom we may or may not have access but rather as a figure for the terms of access themselves has consequences for not only the epistemological status but also the affective resonance of that figure lost as sight. Indeed, recent work has yoked the distances of *Pointed Firs* specifically to questions of affect; in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Heather Love finds in Jewett’s work

a reticence indicative of isolation, longing, and historical injury, reading *Pointed Firs* as emblematic of texts that “turn their backs on the future,” that “choose isolation, turn toward the past, or choose to live in a present disconnected from any larger historical continuum.”⁷ Her interest in these works is in part the disruption they pose to literary and social history; as she says, “In that these texts...turn away from us[,] they have often proved difficult to integrate into a queer literary genealogy.... It is hard to know what to do with texts that resist our advances” (8-9). While Love reads this backward turn as symptomatic of a historical injury whose repercussions persist in the present and constitute “the dark side of modern queer representation” (3), it seems important not simply to interrogate the fact of or reasons for this backward turn but also to analyze its very terms. What if, rather than trying to know what we are kept from knowing, we were instead to define the terms of this not-knowing? What if we viewed the turn(ed) back not as the barrier to relation but instead precisely as a form of relation itself?

Pointed Firs, one of Love’s privileged texts, seems to yield the perfect ground upon which to ask such questions, at least in part because it gently refuses the affective resonance that she attributes to it. In her discussion of Jewett’s visit to the grave of Poor Joanna, Love writes:

Across infinite distances, across the boundary of death itself, the narrator forges a bond with Joanna, but the sad succession that includes them is defined precisely by isolation and loss. In her enfolding of community and isolation, and of eternity and loss, Jewett offers an image of the impossibility of resolving such contradictions....The paradox at the center of this episode is the incongruity of a shared isolation; it is not at all clear, as [Laurie] Shannon argues, that community prevails, or that the islands of grief contained within the community are dissolved into it. Although these voices do reach the island, these sounds serve as signs of disconnection as well as connection: it is not hard to see how they might underline the unbridgeable distance between the island and the mainland. Though these voices might console, how much ‘progress’ can they make against ‘all the sorrow and disappointment in the world?’ (96-97)

⁷ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 2007), 8. Hereafter cited in the text.

Throughout her reading of Jewett, Love relies on diametrical oppositions – between community and isolation, island and mainland, eternity and loss – that become local metonyms for the broader opposition she establishes between the text whose back is turned and the text to which we can readily put ourselves in relation. Relation, however, as our discussion of *Pointed Firs* has already suggested, need not be opposed to the backward turn, or to the phenomenon of being lost-to-sight. Whereas the backwardness of the figures whom she addresses becomes for Love both the proof of past and a source of further injury, the gestures of retreat and backwardness in Jewett more often than not become modes of furthering relation. Although the narrator's decision to refuse the companionability of herb-selling in favor of a more solitary writerly existence involves saying "unkind words of withdrawal to Mrs. Todd," for example, the two women "were not separated or estranged by the change...; on the contrary, a deeper intimacy seemed to begin" (7). Likewise, gestures of disappearance and backs literally turned become occasions for – or proof of – intimacy throughout the text. When the narrator first encounters Mrs. Todd's notoriously reticent brother, William, for instance, she transforms their acquaintance into a kind of burgeoning intimacy by "[falling] behind in the path and [letting] William take the basket alone and precede [her] at some little distance the rest of the way" (44), a gesture he later repays through a disappearance which figures his willingness to remain in her company. As she and Mrs. Todd are preparing to leave Green Island, they "saw William come round the corner of the house as if to look for us, and wave his hand and disappear. 'Why, William's right on deck; I didn't know's we should see any more of him!' exclaimed Mrs. Todd" (50).

The insistence on distance and the refusal of direct interaction in *Pointed Firs* neither preclude nor annul intimacy; indeed, the Poor Joanna passage itself seems to demand that we reconsider the terms of identification and connection, that we rethink the notion that to turn (or to

be) backwards is to negate. In the very section of the Poor Joanna episode that Love cites, the place “remote and islanded” is also the place closest and most intimate:

I drank at the spring, and thought that now and then some one would follow me from the busy, hard-worked, and simple-thoughted countryside of the mainland, which lay dim and dreamlike in the August haze, as Joanna must have watched it many a day. There was the world, and here was she with eternity well begun. In the life of each of us, I said to myself, there is a place remote and islanded, and given to endless regret or secret happiness; we are each the uncompanioned hermit and recluse of an hour or a day; we understand our fellows of the cell to whatever age of history they may belong.

But as I stood alone on the island, in the sea-breeze, suddenly there came a sound of distant voices; gay voices and laughter from a pleasure-boat that was going seaward full of boys and girls. I knew, as if she had told me, that poor Joanna must have heard the like on many and many a summer afternoon, and must have welcomed the good cheer in spite of hopelessness and winter weather, and all the sorrow and disappointment in the world. (Love 95, Jewett 82)

Although Love reads this passage as an example of the loneliness and longing of *Pointed Firs*, its predominant tone seems to be a kind of stoicism or matter-of-factness. From the simple, balanced syntax of “There was the world, and here was she” (which gives a kind of equal reality or immediacy to the distant mainland and the dead woman’s trace) to the apparent equivalence of “endless regret” and “secret happiness,” from the acknowledgment of the universality of Poor Joanna’s “remote and islanded” state to the empathetic understanding that the narrator achieves by herself abandoning the world, the passage suspends us between community and isolation, proximity and distance in a way that acknowledges the coimplication (and the mutual constitution) of the two.

What Love rightly calls the “incongruity of a shared isolation” in the text is hence not, as she claims, a “paradox” (97) but rather the very ground on which Dunnet Landing’s community is predicated.⁸ And although the distances of *Pointed Firs* – including the most central and

⁸ Although Love disparages Shannon’s reading of the Poor Joanna scene, she in fact departs little from its structure or mode of analysis and instead simply turns Shannon’s affective understanding of the episode on its head. Like Love, Shannon finds in the shared solitude of the hermetic woman’s life a kind of

constitutive distance of all, our readerly distance from the narrator – may in fact be “unbridgeable,” these distances do not engender longing for relation but instead already are the form of relation through which the book’s intimacies are built. The distances of *Pointed Firs*, I would argue, are not meant to be bridged or crossed – at least not in ways that would transform its strangeness into something else. Although Love critiques Laurie Shannon’s hasty move toward a “community” which “prevails,” she equally hastily “[resolves]” Jewett’s “contradictions” in the direction of sorrow, disappointment, and isolation. This sorrow itself, of course, becomes a form of connection, linking contemporary queer critics to late nineteenth and early twentieth century queer writers precisely through a shared experience of injury, making the past present (or eliding the remoteness of the past) by revealing the painful commonality of isolation. Love’s argument tends to turn community and isolation into countervailing poles

paradox: “Ironically, one approaches shrines of solitude by a common footpath. The path to Joanna’s grave persists because of visits from other ‘pilgrims’ who, together, forge a kind of community; Joanna, as a ‘plain anchorite,’ nevertheless configures a possible *social* form” (249). While I agree with Shannon’s emphasis on the social potential of Joanna’s remote and islanded condition, I am not sure why such a paradigm needs to be “ironic,” particularly given the text’s own tolerance for and embrace of such alternative modes of sociality. But Shannon, like Love, evinces a kind of impatience with this very co-implication and co-constitutiveness of sociality and solitude, eager to find ways in which Jewett prioritizes one over the other. And so where Love finds in the phrase “all the sorrow and disappointment in the world” a kind of trump card of negative affect, Shannon finds in the presence of the pleasure boat a force that makes “solitariness...a condition that is hard to preserve or even believe. The novel enshrines ‘gay voices,’ ‘laughter,’ and ‘pleasure’ despite its sober respect for those who find its appeal resistible. The spectacular choice of Joanna *sola* and the experience her memory briefly triggers of standing alone, of being ‘islanded,’ emerge as objects of contemplation in what seems an inevitable ‘progress’ towards friendship and redemption” (250). The difference in the two critics’ approaches ultimately seems to relate not only to the affective and relational stances in which they are invested (in Love’s case, an investment in backward and isolated queer figures; in Shannon’s, an interest in the importance of friendship in Jewett’s life and art) but also to their understanding of (the text’s treatment of) interruption. Shannon seems to believe that the incursion of the pleasure boat (“suddenly there came a sound of distant voices...”) is enough to override both the narrator’s contemplative state and the ambience of solitude which pervades the island; Love, by contrast, wonders “how much ‘progress’” these voices possibly “can ... make against ‘all the sorrow and disappointment in the world.’” If I am ultimately more sympathetic to Love’s reading than to Shannon’s, it is because her analysis is more in keeping with my understanding of how interruption typically means (or doesn’t) in *Pointed Firs* (for much more on this, see p.117ff); I depart from both critics, however, when it comes to the fundamental relationship between sociality and solitude. Where both read the former as interrupting and competing with the latter, I’d prefer to understand them as mutually non-interruptive.

between which critics and writers have to choose – for instance, she critiques the fact that “the emphasis in [Carolyn Dinshaw’s] *Getting Medieval* sometimes *falls on community at the expense of isolation*” (38, my emphasis) – but the texts that she treats (or at least this text that she treats) seem invested in the very relation between these relations. What is remarkable about Jewett’s novel – and, indeed, what makes it such a fruitful work for both ecocritical and queer readings – is that it refuses either to transform isolation into connection, or to keep the terms binarily opposed; instead, Jewett constructs a narrative structure that not only represents this kind of intimate reticence or visible invisibility but also constitutes – and is constituted by – it. Keeping the distant distant, that is to say, is not only a trope within her book’s sketches, but also the logic of its very narrative structure. Jewett suspends us in a distant proximity, one that holds access and obstruction, intimacy and distance, together so as to produce a kind of limited sight with radically unobtrusive limitations – or, to put it another way, that produces a radically obstructed sight that nevertheless manages to be enough. If *Pointed Firs* refuses us anything, it seems, it is desire for more than it yields. Both the text’s own lexicon and our readerly experience of that lexicon are permeated by a kind of quiet sufficiency – a register that, in the Poor Joanna episode, yields the muted but insistent equality of “endless regret” and “secret happiness.” *Pointed Firs*, it seems, asks us to idle or to tarry more than it asks us to long.

But if longing, desire, loneliness, and shame constitute the affective register of the backward historical figure (that is to say, both the historical experience *of that figure* and our relation *to that figure*), what might Jewett’s text have to teach us about how not seeing and not knowing may themselves evoke or constitute affects? In other words: the turned back is unwelcoming, difficult, or resistant (Love’s terms) only if what we are after is the face, only if what we seek is access to the past or the answer to a hermeneutic riddle or a wholly integrated

literary genealogy. But what if we want to understand epistemology and genealogy and relation as such? This is not a revision of Love's argument but rather an addition to it, one which promises to illuminate connections between queer theory and ecocriticism, and which potentially expands the ground upon which Love's readings can be said to work. For if we stop using backwardness diagnostically and begin using it paradigmatically, we can see the way in which this figure of the turned back is in fact not simply the result (or further cause) of particular historical injuries, but also constitutive of the narrative or historiographical stance more generally. The turned back, after all, need not be indicative of trauma or isolation on the back-turned figure's part (although it certainly might be), and also need not frustrate, puzzle, or inspire desire in us (although it certainly can). Instead, the back-turned figure might be the disruption or impediment which makes us aware of genealogy and transmission in the first place, which in its very persistence allows us to engage with mode and mediacy rather than content and "event." In some respects, then, Love's "backward subjects" are extraneous figures, or are simply subjects radically compatible with a critical mode that could – and would – persist even without them.

In order to ask these questions of the turned back, however, we need to reconsider our terms themselves, to open up not only the lexicon but also the dimensionality of the conversation. For "back" embroils us in the realm of binary relations; it makes sense only with – and only in opposition to – "front," a pairing that often inscribes a normative bias in favor of the term associated with progress and exposure.⁹ And even if part of what Love resists is the current

⁹ As François writes in *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience*, "continued faith in the unambiguous good of articulation and expression appears in everyday speech in the difficulty of using terms such as *frankness*, *directness*, *transparency*, or *self-expression* without normative effect of without presuming a desire for such qualities; perhaps more unexpectedly, this same confidence in the value of exposure undergirds the hermeneutics of suspicion informing many of our most prized methods of literary criticism and cultural theory, where the quest for the 'new' or materially different takes the form either of the recuperation and recovery of something previously overlooked, neglected, undervalued, or, on the

push toward pride, a mode of social and critical engagement that denies the legacy of shame and homophobia so foundational to queer historical experience, her terms leave us on a surface where only two options exist – to turn one’s back or to bare one’s soul, to remain backward or to “progress,” to linger in the darkness or to come out into the light. Love’s analysis, in other words, seems to dwell upon Foucault’s (Velasquez’s) plane of representation, treating characters who either face forward or turn their backs, who either facilitate the progress of modernity or refuse it. But what if we were to translate her terms and analysis from Foucault’s plane to his transversal line, to consider not whether literary figures are revealed or concealed, are moving forward or are bogged down in their negativity, but rather where they stand transversally, reading their role or status according to the kind of attention they demand? The opacity of Velasquez’s (back-turned) canvas, after all, does not diminish its visibility but rather calls attention to it. Likewise, the invisible narrator lingers in or as a frontal kind of blankness. Like the back of the canvas, notable not simply because of its illegibility but because of how its illegibility is the first thing to meet our gaze, the narrator is interesting for being obstructed where we expect transparency, or, alternatively, for being blank characterologically where we expect personal detail.¹⁰ Like Velasquez’s painter’s canvas, conspicuous in its blankness, the *Pointed Firs*

contrary, of the demystification and exposure of the secret ideological underworkings of power. Neither of these critical models, I argue below, is prepared to accept something that does not require either the work of disclosure or the effort of recovery” (xvi).

¹⁰ Oddly, then, the narrator of *Pointed Firs* resembles the “minor characters” addressed in Alex Woloch’s *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*: “The strange significance of minor characters, in other words, resides largely in the way that the character disappears, and in the tension or relief that results from this vanishing. These feelings are often solicited by the narrative, and it is the disappearance of the minor character...that, finally, is integrated into his or her interesting speech or memorable gesture. We feel interest and outrage, painful concern or amused consent about what happens to minor characters: not simply their fate within the story (whether they marry or die, make their fortune or lose it, find a home or become exiled) but also in the narrative discourse itself (how they are finally overshadowed or absorbed into someone else’s story, swallowed within or expelled from another person’s plot). This is simply, once again, to locate the minor character at the junction between implied person and narrative form, to read characterization in terms of the tension that narrative

narrator comes to matter not for who she is but rather for the fact *that she is* (and, of course, for the fact that – and the way in which – she sees). What seems like a refusal of detail or a refusal of engagement – or, that is to say, a refusal to face forward – is instead a mode of persistence.

And with that notion of (simple?) persistence, we return to the matter of sufficiency gestured toward above, in our reading of Love's treatment of Poor Joanna. Such a reading – of an insistent anonymity that is something other than a cheat, of a mode of quietness that still manages to grant us "enough," of a blankness that inspires neither desire nor resentment (indeed,

continually elicits between an individual who claims our interest and a fictional totality that forces his individual out of, or beneath, the discursive world" (37-38). Although the *Pointed Firs* narrator does not disappear in the same way as do the minor characters shuttled off stage in the novels at the heart of Woloch's study, she is persistently disappearing while appearing; indeed, she is not known to us except insofar as she fails to be so. Her "vanishing" does not represent a shift in or mark the end of her role in the narrative (apart from the noticeable shift from the visibility of the character described in the first chapter to the persistent invisibility of the narrator whose first person voice emerges in the next) but rather is the very nature of that role – she is a kind of persistent vanishing, one that does not delimit her importance but instead defines its terms. Her status in the novel, then, ultimately feels more akin to the back of Velasquez's painter's canvas, up front and illegible, noticeable for the way in which it fails to disclose its own terms at the same time that it demands being attended to. Like *Moby Dick*'s Bulkington, the *Pointed Firs* narrator "comes to command a peculiar kind of attention in the partial occlusion of [her] fullness" (Woloch 42). To further complicate matters, however, the *Pointed Firs* narrator is less Bulkington than she is Ishmael; whereas Woloch's study focuses on the one vs. the many, and this particular analysis defines the minor character in opposition to the protagonist, Jewett's novel presents a visibly invisible narrator who is also the nominal protagonist. Rather than this (the centrality of her occlusion, her occluded centrality) being a paradox, I would like to suggest that it is in keeping with Jewett's emphasis on alternate modes of relationality – on the possibility that we can feel connected to someone with whom we have only minimal acquaintance, that a figure with whom we have only passing encounters or with whom we only sit unacknowledged can become a "friend." And "friend" in this context does not undo or somehow remediate distance; it is an alternate mode of relationality – not an alternate mode of reaching a familiar state of relation – that is at stake in Jewett's pages. The possibility that this alternate relationality may be fostered and/or presented through paradigms of sight in turn calls to mind Denise Riley's citation of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* in her remarkable essay "The Right to Be Lonely": "'So that is marriage,' Lily thought, a man and a woman looking at a girl throwing a ball.' In this neatest of sentences, which holds so many pairs of eyes, we glimpse in a flash the meditative watcher who herself looks on at a couple who are conjoined as such through their contemplation of the child playing. And perhaps just such a 'looking on' might constitute more or less everyone's relation to the family, whether or not they actually inhabit one." This gesture toward a kind of constitutive onlooking, one which challenges the predominance of heterosexual relational norms by suggesting a kind of inevitable apart-ness in everyone's connection to family life, promises to effectively connect the structural considerations of this reading of Jewett (the narrator as visible invisibility, the narrator as "character of" rather than – or in addition to – straightforward "character") to their more thematic or even political counterparts (the narrator as figure for or embodiment of alternative affects, alternative relations, alternative ways of defining or understanding the family).

that often seems to inspire little at all) – can perhaps all too easily come to seem a form of quietism, particularly when juxtaposed with the explicitly political implications of Love’s project.¹¹ Although Love resists the rhetoric of pride sweeping across queer activism and academic discourse alike, she in no way advocates slumbering in the darkness that she excavates from literary history. As she admits with some trepidation in her introduction, “it is not clear how such dark representations from the past will lead toward a brighter future for queers. Still, it may be necessary to check the impulse to turn these representations to good use in order to see them at all” (4). And as she asks in her conclusion, “Is it possible that such backward figures might be capable of making social change? What exactly does a collective movement of isolates look like? What kind of revolutionary action can be expected from those who have slept a hundred years?” (147) Whereas Love wants to (re)mark these negative affects, then, she does so in order to mobilize them; her “persistent attention to ‘useless’ feelings,” like (her reading of) Sianne Ngai’s, “is all about action: about how and why it is blocked, and about how to locate motives for political action when none is visible” (13). Love’s are affects that we must acknowledge so as to effectively move beyond; it is not that pride or openness are, for her, ignoble goals, but rather that they must be predicated on a recognition – and retention – of the negativity and darkness that preceded and perhaps even facilitated them. My reading, however, attempts to understand Jewett’s characters (particularly the narrator) as existing in a realm outside the push and pull of hiddenness and exposure, of approach and retreat.

By persisting in her visible invisibility, by dwelling in her anonymity at the forefront of our transversal line, and by demanding attention without yielding identity, the narrator makes invisibility itself a force or dimension to be engaged. Her inaccessibility is not what keeps her

¹¹ For more on “moods of ‘enoughness,’” see François, *Open Secrets*, a book that similarly confronts its own potential to be read as quietist or nihilist.

from us but rather what connects her to us (precisely insofar as it is what she is to us). Backwardness, in other words, need not be overcome in order to be a form of relation, just as invisibility need not be turned visible in order to matter politically; both already are forms of engagement. What we need, to once again borrow terms from Foucault's reading of *Las Meninas*, is not to magically turn the canvas forward but to develop a lexicon for how the canvas engages us in its very backwardness. Whereas innumerable political projects begin by making the invisible visible or bringing the dark to light, what if we were instead to engage with the complicated terms of invisibility and darkness and backwardness themselves, not to move beyond but to dwell within? How might we learn to see – decipher, understand, engage, render polyvalent – what seems monolithically unknowable? How might we learn to read the forms of relation that inaccessibility or reticence or isolation already inscribe?

If the narrator on Shell-heap Island is, for Love, an example of negative or dark affect (“Though these voices might console, how much ‘progress’ can they make against ‘all the sorrow and disappointment in the world?’”), then she is, for me, something more akin to a figure for affect as such. At Poor Joanna's hermitage (and beyond), the narrator – nameless, ageless, nearly personality-less – is a figure who exists to minimally acknowledge and to be minimally acknowledged, who stands in both obstructed and intimate relation to a mainland made “dim and dream-like” by the mid-day haze, who persists in a mutedly emotional connection to a woman whom she knows only as a story and only in her solitude. In this minimally present persistence, the narrator comes to bear – or perhaps herself becomes – what we might call an environmental or an atmospheric affect. She is defined not by what we feel about her but instead by the fact *that we feel* towards her, becoming a figure for affect (and its impediments) itself rather than representing or engendering affect of any particular sort. And here returns my sense that Love

overstates the affective register of the text, that she bases her discussion on a degree of negative emotion not fully realized in Jewett's pages. It is not that the terms she uses to discuss Jewett's text – loneliness, sorrow, etc. – do not appear in the lexicon of *Pointed Firs* itself, but rather that they seem to be used more complicatedly or obliquely therein than Love's analysis acknowledges. The emotions that they indicate, that is to say, often feel detached from any given subject or object, floating atmospherically in a manner that makes their impact feel diffuse and their resonance somewhat indistinct. What does it mean, for instance, that Poor Joanna is "poor"? Is the term there to indicate the intensity of the hermetic woman's pathos or the sadness of the Dunnet Landingers to be left behind? Does it indicate Joanna's state in the world or the world's sense that to forsake its trappings is to be left in a kind of poverty? Does it suggest Joanna's affect, or the way in which Joanna's absence has *affected* others? Is it a storyteller's flourish, there for the sake of rhythm and cadence? Or is it a term of endearment, something which demonstrates the teller's intimacy with and knowledge about the woman's life? (The narrator, we notice, doesn't deem Joanna "poor" until she too has been to Shell-heap Island.¹²) The "poor"ness of Joanna seems to suffuse the episode in which she "appears" without ever taking hold; like the scent of the herbs that drifts through the narrator's window on Dunnet

¹² A similar ambiguity of affective source or origin takes hold in the treatment of Elijah Tilley's wife, the "poor dear." Is *she* poor because she has left the world behind, or is Captain Tilley himself the poor one for being forced to live without her? The answer, of course, seems to be neither – or perhaps both. "Poor" floats between the two subjects atmospherically and relationally, becoming a descriptor more akin to "husband" or "wife" or "friend" than it is to bodily states like "hot" or "cold" or "dead." "Poor," in other words, is the ground of their relation as much as it is an indicator of their separation. In this, Jewett's language recalls what Denise Riley says of language and affect (or language *as* affect) more broadly in *Impersonal Passion*: Her essays, she explains, "listen to common twists of speech which in themselves enact feeling, rather than simply and obediently conveying it as we elect.... As a result they'll come closer to apprehending language's affect as that outward unconscious which hovers between people, rather than swimming upward from the privacy of each heart" (3-4). In *Pointed Firs*, both affective language and affective experiences seem to do this work of hovering, making entities like the ego or the bounded subject or even the question of privacy secondary to a kind of shared ambient realm (however reticent, however minimal) that exists between and grounds them all.

Landing mornings and indicate that Mrs. Todd is afoot, emotions saturate the book without ever coming to define or shape it. It is here – in the suffused, ephemeral, atmospheric quality of emotionality – that the mutedness of the book becomes intelligible.

It is here, too, that the book's affective register comes to feel environmental. Whereas we tend to think of affect in terms of contact or touch, *Pointed Firs* gives us a narrative and affective register that is seemingly more akin to the diffuseness of scent, that separates emotion from subject and object, even from human agency, allowing emotion to impersonally persist in a way that allows us to feel its finer gradations, its quiet shifts, its diminutions. *Pointed Firs* is a book of ambience, of vacation, of bounds that become as hazy as the seacoast air continuously hanging above its events; the emotionality of the text is similarly amorphous, becoming something that we sense rather than identify, something that we understand even though we may not be able to locate it. As in the scene on Shell-heap island, where “hopelessness” and “winter weather” are syntactically and thematically aligned, throughout the text, emotion and relation come to gently saturate the scenes like the weather. As people persist side by side, minimally acknowledged, and as emotions fill rooms and cross oceans and hang over islands, affect comes to seem less like something harnessed or deeply felt than like something obliquely experienced or benignly endured. Less a direct hit than a glancing touch (or a passing odor), the obliqueness of emotionality in the book is what gives the text its muted or emotionally delocalized feel. Ultimately, Jewett's lexicon seems to demand an approach to tone much like the one Anne-Lise François adopts in *Open Secrets*: “I wish to revive our sense of Wordsworth's tonelessness as a form of constative simplicity rather than as the stifled expression of a grief and guilt too strong to surface otherwise” (157). What is there to surface in *Pointed Firs* – happiness, sorrow, loneliness, connection, weariness, worry, alienation, abandonment, glee – does in fact surface.

What is remarkable is not how the text masks or mutes or hides emotions but rather how it presents them in their mutedness, in their reticence – and how, by consequence, it makes emotion medial, lingering like the fog or the haze or the various invisibilities whose appearance-as-disappearance defines Captain Littlepage’s Waiting Place.

In addition to the way in which Jewett’s affective language tends to float free of any discernible subjects (or, alternatively, seems to hover perpetually between them), other forms of syntactic play make the lexicon feel startlingly muted. The first subjective emotion in the book is the “subdued excitement” with which “the younger portion of the company [follows]” the newly landed visitor “up the narrow street of the salt-aired, white-clapboarded little town” (2), and the lexicon of the text in the sketches that follow is defined by this kind of adverbial quieting of its most intense or capacious affects – and, conversely, by the adverbial (or adjectival) magnifying of its most limited ones. As the narrator leaves the crowd of mourners after Mrs. Begg’s funeral and watches their procession continue, she explains that the whole scene “gave one *a sort of* pain” (15); likewise, she describes Mrs. Blackett’s reaction to the relative lack of elderly compatriots at the Bowden Family Reunion as bearing “*a touch of* sadness” (112). Just as she seems reluctant to depict pathos without a subduing qualifier, so too does she seem reluctant to allow banal, mundane, or seemingly evasive moments to persist without suggesting their emotional capacity. One of the strongest adverbs in the text – “ostentatiously” – is applied to perhaps the least likely of actions – Mrs. Todd’s process of leaving spearmint cough drop syrup “to cool” (62), and one of the affectively strongest nouns – “desire” – is attached at least once to an object that seems to compromise its intensity, as when Mrs. Todd evinces an “unmistakable desire for reticence” (65). Affective states, it seems, gravitate toward some kind of quiet center, one more invested in maintaining equilibrium – in persisting in its being – than it is in registering

progression or change. Whereas Catriona Sandilands decries those who find in Jewett's work "a spinsterly lack of passion," I'd like to suggest that there is in fact a kind of *affirmative* dispassion at work throughout *Pointed Firs* – a kind of affective and rhetorical mutedness whose emotional register is intimately linked to the text's portrayal of alternate relation.¹³

Just as intense affects are insistently muted in the narrator's descriptions of Dunnet Landing, affects that we think of as being monolithic or as foreclosing further affective investigation are revealed to be surprisingly polydimensional. Tellingly, one of the most complicated and internally varied descriptors of Dunnet Landings' emotion throughout the book is "indifference." When the narrator asks after Santin Bowden, the family member whose desire for military greatness has been foiled by his use of "stim'lates," Mrs. Todd explains his situation "with lofty indifference" (101), and, later, Elijah Tilley's wariness toward strangers is described as a form of "scornful indifference" (114). At times, indifference's possible difference from itself is revealed not through adjectival modification, but through the juxtaposing of tone with gesture, as when Mrs. Todd arrives on Green Island: "'Well, mother, here I be!' she announced with indifference; but they stood and beamed in each other's faces" (35). It is not that indifference masks true emotion (a reading which would understand Mrs. Todd's "indifference" as a feigned emotion attempting to hide her glee), just as it is not true that the narrator's "sort of pain" in the face of Mrs. Begg's funeral suggests either a lack of investment in the situation or an attempt to repress the investment that she does in fact feel. Rather, *Pointed Firs* expands the range of affects that can be considered meaningful or legible. Just as a friendship can exist between figures who rarely speak, and just as leaving someone alone can be as deep a gesture of

¹³ Catriona Sandilands, "The Importance of Reading Queerly: Jewett's *Deephaven* as Feminist Ecology" (ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment 11.2 [Summer 2004], 61). Hereafter cited in the text. I will return to Sandilands's article (and the possibility of affirmative dispassion) in chapter three, where I discuss the affects of environmental and queer politics.

intimacy as confiding in her trust, the basic tasks of an herbalist can be “[ostentatious]” and the deeply felt reunion between a mainland daughter and her islanded mother can incorporate “indifference.” One can indifferently beam just as one can ostentatiously leave a pot to cool on the stove. “A sort of pain” and “a touch of sadness” can be modes of showing emotion as much as they are a mode of diminishing, disavowing, or repressing it. Like the “incongruity of shared isolation,” which is not, as Love would have us think, a paradox, but rather the ground of relation upon which *Pointed Firs* is predicated, the affective lexicon of the text allows such seeming opposites to coexist and intermingle in a way that challenges the received definitions and understood applications of both.

Ambient Companionship

Indeed, perhaps Jewett’s chief accomplishment in *Pointed Firs* is her ability to present emotions precisely in or as their mutedness, to depict encounters precisely in or as their reticence, to make us understand that contact or connection need not be the determining force in our relationships either to people or to place.¹⁴ Like the narrator and the Waiting Place figures, who appear as a kind of disappearance, characters and relations and events throughout Jewett’s text become legible *through* their very minimalism, not in spite of it. The clearest characterological example of this phenomenon is once again Elijah Tilley, the hermetic seafarer

¹⁴ This point is important not only on its own terms, and not only insofar as it promises to enrich our reading of Jewett, but also insofar as it potentially expands the bounds of queer theory’s attention, which thus far has been focused on strong affects, and thus split between the “good” and the “bad.” The emphasis, traditionally, has fallen on the latter, but recently, critics have made a turn to the latter; see, for instance, Michael D. Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008). Even those queer theoretical works that aim to turn to less dramatic emotions still end up couching their analysis within the good/bad dichotomy. Sianne Ngai’s book *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge & London: Harvard U P, 2005), to provide just one example, focuses on “minor” emotions, including envy, irritation, and “stuplimity”; these emotions’ minoriness, however, always is subsumed beneath their *ugliness*. But what of emotions whose primary characteristic is not their positive or negative valence, but rather their ability to only barely appear, and to only barely persist?

who “appeared to regard a stranger with scornful indifference. You might see him standing on the pebble beach or in a fish-house doorway but when you came nearer he was gone” (116). As in the Waiting Place, where “when [the sailors] got close inshore they could see the shapes of folks, but they never could get near them” (25), nearness with Tilley becomes a mode of erasure. His character *is* his disappearing, and the narrator’s ultimate intimacy with him is little other than a proximity to this tendency to disappear (from sight, into thought, into the recesses of his own past); his reticence and his distance, in other words, do not compromise or foreclose relation but rather constitute it. And it seems no accident that in his persistent gestures of disappearance, Tilley resembles those figures whom the narrator identifies as “a mirage or something of that sort” (27) and whom Littlepage (despite his refusal to assent to their surreality) admits were “all common ghosts, but the conditions were unusual favorable for seeing them” (27). In both renderings, the figures are as much atmospheric as they are embodied, made legible by the imaginations of starving men in one understanding and by meteorological conditions in another. The epistemological question that surrounds them is as much *how or why they (dis)appear* as it is *what they are*.

In order to become friendly with Tilley, then, the narrator must engage with his gestures of retreat, and must learn to recognize the extent to which friendship for (or with) him predicates itself on reticence rather than striving to overcome it. The rhythms of her first encounter with the seafarer reveal her burgeoning comfort with this mode of companioning:

Elijah Tilley was such an evasive, discouraged-looking person, heavy-headed, and stooping so that one could never look him in the face, that even after his friendly exclamation about Monroe Pennell, the lobster smack’s skipper, and the sleepy boy, I did not venture at once to speak again. Mr. Tilley was carrying a small haddock in one hand, and presently shifted it to the other hand lest it might touch my skirt. I knew that my company was accepted, and we walked together a little way.

“You mean to have a good supper,” I ventured to say, by way of friendliness.

“Goin’ to have this ‘ere haddock an’ some o’ my good baked potatoes; must eat to live,” responded my companion with great pleasantness and open approval. I found that I had suddenly left the forbidding coast and come into the smooth little harbor of friendship.

... “Was there a good catch to-day?” I asked, stopping a moment. “I didn’t happen to be on the shore when the boats came in.”

“No; all come in pretty light,” answered Mr. Tilley. “... Well, I don’t expect they feel like bitin’ every day; we l’arn to humor ‘em a little, an’ let ‘em have their way ‘bout it. These plaguey dog-fish kind of worry ‘em.” Mr. Tilley pronounced the last sentence with much sympathy, as if he looked upon himself as a true friend of all the haddock and codfish that lived on the fishing grounds, and so we parted. (115-119)

The rhythm of the exchange is full of stops and starts, of gestures of acceptance never fully catching hold, of shifts in attitude or perception transpiring through the most minimal of gestures. The shift from “I did not venture at once to speak again” to “I ventured to say” (an affirmative gesture which inscribes its own reticence or hesitancy) stems from Elijah Tilley’s own bodily shift, from his decision to avoid touching the narrator with the haddock in his hand. The “acceptance” that such a gesture implies, importantly, remains unacknowledged and unmarked by either party; instead, the narrator simply remains by the old man’s side, and ultimately ventures to ask him questions about the day’s catch. Ultimately, she becomes as dear to him as are the haddock that he fishes – and, like them, she engages in a radically impersonal relationship with Tilley, present more as body than as personality, more subject to his whims than she is permitted to introduce or indulge in her own.¹⁵

¹⁵ Importantly, the passage that describes this burgeoning relationship is full of lexical play, and slippage between literal and figural registers: the language, like the man it describes, is capaciously evasive. As the haddock that Elijah Tilley shifts from one hand to another in a gesture of friendship becomes the haddock to which he is a “true friend,” we see echoes of Jewett’s own treatment of friends (and friendship) not only as object but as mode as well. (In a January, 1872 diary entry, Jewett wrote of her friend Kate Birkhead: “Oh Kate does me so much good! She always helps me and makes me stronger. I know that it all comes from God, but I am so glad the ‘way’ is Kate” (cited in Pryse, 47).) Likewise, as the harbor beside which the companions stand becomes the figural “forbidding coast and...smooth little harbor of friendship,” we see the extent to which the Dunnet Landingers’ understanding of their relations and experience alike are filtered through environmental metaphors. Relation, for them, is fundamentally environmental.

The conditions of Tilley's life more generally likewise seem to be more atmospheric or ambient than focused on the relations between specific subjects and objects; relation itself for him is understood as a kind of persistence rather than as a vector-like or dyadic mode. As such, the narrator's visit to his home, which constitutes the book's concluding portrait of newfound friendship, is defined by an objectless watch, a distant gaze, a refusal or inability to appear to sight. The reticent companions look not at each other but past each other, engaging in a missing that is a kind of meeting, a sharing of solitude that places an irrevocably distant loved one at its empty center. Throughout the afternoon, gestures of mutual forgetting and shared, non-efficacious watch become signs of burgeoning intimacy:

I ventured to say that somebody must be a very good housekeeper.

"That's me," acknowledged the old fisherman with frankness. "There ain't nobody here but me. I try to keep things looking right, same's poor dear left 'em. You set down here in this chair, then you can look off an' see the water. None on 'em thought I was goin' to get along alone, no way, but I wa'n't goin' to have my house turned upsi' down an' all changed about; no, not to please nobody. I was the only one knew just how she liked to have things set, poor dear, an' I said I was goin' to make shift, and I have made shift. I'd rather tough it out alone." And he sighed heavily, as if to sigh were his familiar consolation.

We were both silent for a minute; the old man looked out the window, as if he had forgotten I was there.

"You must miss her very much?" I said at last.

"I do miss her," he answered, and sighed again. "Folks all kep' repeatin' that time would ease me, but I can't find it does. No, I miss her just the same every day.... I get so some days it feels as if poor dear might step right back into this kitchen. I keep a-watchin' them doors as if she might step in to ary one. Yes, ma'am, I keep a-lookin' off an' droppin' o' my stitches; that's just how it seems. I can't git over losin' of her no way nor no how. Yes, ma'am, that's just how it seems to me."

I did not say anything, and he did not look up.

"I git feelin' so sometimes I have to lay everything by an' go out door. She was a pretty sweet creatur' long's she lived," the old man added mournfully. "There's that little rockin' chair o' her'n, I set an' notice it an' think how strange 'tis a creatur' like her should be gone an' that chair be here right in its old place."

...The old widower sat with his head bowed over his knitting, as if he were hastily shortening the very thread of time. The minutes went slowly by. He stopped his work and clasped his hands firmly together. I saw he had forgotten his guest, and I kept the

afternoon watch with him. At last he looked up as if but a moment had passed of his continual loneliness. (121-122)¹⁶

As the narrator passes the afternoon in Tilley's well-tended home, her presence does not constitute his sense of companionship but rather somehow illuminates the companionship that already populated his rooms. Her willingness to linger beside the grieving seafarer, that is, makes legible what has been there all along – a kind of atmospheric and impersonal togetherness, one predicated on memory and looking and longing rather than on the physical presence of another person. Companionship in *Pointed Firs* is as often solitary as it is shared – in large part because the definition of “togetherness” that circulates through Dunnet Landing is so expansive. Mrs. Todd can feel a kind of togetherness with her remote and islanded mother, just as she and Mrs. Fosdick can both feel a kind of distanced kinship with the long islanded – and long dead – Joanna. Elijah Tilley can feel a connection to his dead wife – one so profound that it both defines his anticipatory gestures and continues to teach him about their relationship. The old seamen who gather by the harbor can form a deeply intimate “secret companionship” despite the fact that

¹⁶ Clearly, the paradigm exemplified by Elijah Tilley not only reveals the particularities of the fading seafaring culture of Dunnet Landing, but also connects to the condition of the rural elderly more generally – and less temporally specifically. As I was working on this chapter, an article appeared in the *New York Times*, entitled “For Elderly in Rural Areas, Hard Times Get Harder” and filled with portraits of contemporary figures whose solitude – neither actively desired nor actively resented – calls to mind the situations of Jewett's fictional Dunnet Landings. George Burgess, a 96-year-old resident of Torrington, Wyoming, lives in a home whose status as a living tribute to an absent spouse is reminiscent of Elijah Tilley's living shrine to his “poor dear”: “He glanced around the tiny, cluttered living room — the coal stove, the broken television, the walls lined with pictures of his wife, Laura, who died just over a year ago after more than 60 years of marriage.” Nor is this phenomenon gender-specific. The article closes with a portrait of Norma Clark, whose paradigms of objectless sight and the far-off gaze could have come straight from the pages of *Pointed Firs*: “Ms. Clark, the 80-year-old with the bad hip, said she did not suffer from the solitude either. Her chair is positioned to look through the big picture window that dominates her living room. On a clear day, you can see across her land and all the way, 60 miles or so, to Laramie Peak. It is a landscape drenched with the memory, she said, of her husband, Leo, who died last year after a long illness, and the six daughters they raised together on the land. ‘I sit, and I look,’ she said.” (“For Elderly in Rural Areas, Hard Times Get Harder.” *The New York Times*. December 10, 2009. Page A1.)

they are “as inexpressive” as their boats, as unlikely to engage in small talk as “a company of elephants” (114).

And if distance (silence, reticence) does not disrupt this alternate form of companionship then neither, importantly, does togetherness. Along with the verbal tics and repeated sighs that constitute the afternoon’s seemingly circular temporality, another insistently repetitive gesture throughout the scene is Elijah Tilley’s act of forgetting his companion.¹⁷ She is less present to him, it soon becomes clear, than are his feelings for his absent wife; their visit is punctuated by his losing track of his guest and her persisting with him nevertheless, remaining by his side as he keeps his endless, insistent watch. In the process of opening his home to her, he also opens his “continual loneliness”; the two sit companionably within that isolated (and typically isolating) emotion, creating a social space that is in some respects everything but dyadic. Their intimacy is dependent both on their shared missing of poor dear, a dynamic that expands the dyad to include an absent third (and, indeed, the seemingly embodied or personified act of missing itself) and on Elijah Tilley’s (quite different) missing of the narrator, a dynamic that makes their afternoon feel like an experience of shared solitude, of two isolated beings dwelling beside one another in that isolation. They are both more and less, that is to say, than “a couple.” Their emotions are directed not at one another but at a common object – or, more precisely, at a common missing of that object. The nameless narrator and the mournful seafarer demonstrate their burgeoning intimacy precisely through their ability to leave each other alone.

In this, the scene at Tilley’s modest home comes to illustrate an alternative definition of companioning akin to that advocated by Denise Riley in “The Right to Be Lonely”:

¹⁷ Similar paradigms of forgetting take place within the narrator’s conversation with Captain Littlepage. See *Pointed Firs* pp.28ff.

The right to be lonely could also suggest the prospect of being alone yet being understood as social within one's solitariness. Solitude, as a pretty noun often religiously linked to creativity's desiderata, may be acknowledged to be necessary; *this* admission is anodyne enough. But there's a stronger solitude which refuses to be understood as merely presocial and which rejects the benevolent will to make everything, and it too, familial. This solitude has no time for any plangency about its own 'exclusion.' Indeed, it groans at the prospect of being tenderly ushered into the domain of the new social; its bearers are in no constellation but live as units of one, are maybe childless, parentless, without siblings, unattached, unmarried, widowed, are not communitarian, are transiently or are even (they can't know) permanently single, and are not in a panic. They simply find themselves alone. (57-58)

Although Elijah Tilley perhaps has more plangency about his own aloneness than do Riley's solitudes, he – like them – doesn't seek to remedy or redeem his loneliness; instead, he seeks to inhabit it – and to share its contours with others on the rare occasions when he finds himself companioned. His commitment to his own solitude becomes a way of paying living tribute to his poor dear. She remains with him in her absence; he remains with her in his widow(er)hood. His aloneness, in other words (whether experienced on his own or in the company of others), becomes his mode of relating to her in and through the fact that she is gone. Like Poor Joanna, who “[lived] alone with her poor insistent human nature and the calms and passions of the sea and sky” (82), those aspects of the natural world coming to bear as much affective resonance as her human nature, and like the travelers in William Wordsworth's “Michael,” “who journey thither [and] find themselves alone / With a few sheep, with rocks and stones, and kites / That overhead are sailing in the sky,”¹⁸ Elijah Tilley and the anonymous narrator remain “alone with” one another – and “alone with” the lingering, ambient presence of poor dear. Each is as non-disruptive to and as non-demanding of his (her) companion as are the sea and sky to Joanna or the sheep and rocks and stones and kites to Wordsworth's figures. Rather than being predicated

¹⁸ William Wordsworth, “Michael,” in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2000), ll.10-11.

on affinity or commonality or attraction, the characters' friendship stems from the way in which they impersonally environ one another.

Ultimately, the narrator has no more capacity to intervene in (or directly affect) the patterns of Elijah Tilley's life than does "that little rockin' chair o' [poor dear's]," which he "set an' notice," which makes him "think how strange 'tis a creatur' like her should be gone an' that chair be here right in its old place." Whereas we tend to associate "friendliness" with such affective criteria as "warmth" and "generosity" and "investment" – all terms which seem to harness a kind of deeply human vivacity – characters in *Pointed Firs* often come to be laudable for a kind of stony stoicism, or for their object-like (and often seemingly indifferent) relation to the world. In one of the most deeply admiring and reverential passages in the text, the narrator comments that Mrs. Todd "had mounted a gray rock, and stood there grand and architectural, like a *caryatide*" (30), a description whose mythological tone echoes an earlier claim that "her height and massiveness in the low room gave her the look of a huge sibyl" (8). This way of understanding people – by the space they take up, by how they are situated in their environment, by the particular kind of para-humanity they seem to embody – complicates not only what it would mean to *relate* to them (how does one know she has made a connection with a caryatid?) but also what it would mean for them to *feel* (how does a caryatid show love?). The object-like nature of Dunnet Landing's characters does not make them unfit friends, but rather makes the lexicon of friendship itself one of an invested or intimate indifference, rather than one that expects to combat distance with immediacy or warmth. Bill Brown argues that "[b]y its closing chapters..., *The Country of the Pointed Firs* has depicted a world where it makes complete sense to say that material objects have assumed the inexpressivity of men, because this is a world where the animate and inanimate seem to have exchanged registers, where things behave like

humans and humans like things” (113). Indeed, throughout *Pointed Firs*, Jewett seems determined to deflect or redirect the human-ness of her characters, to ask us to understand them more as we understand the seemingly non-subjective forces of the natural world – the weather, the Wordsworthian “rocks, and stones, and kites” which populate the Dunnet Landing landscape, the breaking waves of the sea.

Like Elijah Tilley and his mates, whose insistent quietness makes them resemble “a company of elephants,” “landmark pine”s, and “lofty-minded old camel”s (114-115) as much as the more conventionally communicative residents of Dunnet Landing, the narrator’s own quietness – which in her case is figured as receptivity rather than a kind of shyness or recalcitrance – takes her status into the realm of the non-human as well. During Mrs. Fosdick’s visit, she reports, “I soon grew more or less acquainted with the histories of all [the family’s] fortunes and misfortunes, and the subjects of an intimate nature were no more withheld from my ears than if I had been a shell on the mantelpiece” (59). The shell, a figure that earlier in the same episode becomes a sign of hermeticism (“I had been living in the quaint little house with as much comfort and unconsciousness as if it were a larger body, or a double shell”), is here a sign of non-threatening receptivity or disinterested openness.¹⁹ Rather than participating in a paradigm of reciprocal openness or mutual confidence, in which an interlocutor would hear as many secrets as she herself was willing to share, the narrator is precisely as receptive as she is hermetic. The paradigm is as insistently asymmetrical, that is to say, as it is impersonal.²⁰ In this

¹⁹ A shell is, importantly, also the container for something that is no longer present. I mention this in part because paradigms of affirmative absence and material hollowing will become important to the argument of the next chapter.

²⁰ In this asymmetry and impersonality, Jewett’s pages evince a version of what Milette Shamir, in her reading of Thoreau, deems “‘depersonalizing’ intimacy”: “Thoreau develops...an alternative logic of intimacy, one that allows for masculine relations while avoiding the dangers of this ‘feminizing’ self-exposure. Throughout his career...Thoreau repudiated the feminine form of intimacy, defined as the

episode, among others, the narrator is confided in not because of some defining character trait but rather because of her willingness to elide such traits. Her radical impersonality, which makes her more akin to a “shell on the mantelpiece” than to a human interlocutor, is what grants her access to Mrs. Fosdick’s life stories and most deeply felt emotions. The ideal listener here resembles the weather, the atmosphere, the (often natural) objects and ephemera that populate a good hostess’s “best room.”

In a realm where a man can reserve his deepest feelings for a haddock, where an ideal listener resembles a decorative shell, and where two people can achieve closeness through a kind of mutual non-acknowledgment (or mutually minimal acknowledgment), it’s not surprising to find an alternate model for our understanding of interpersonal affect and attachment alike. Although we tend to think of relation as being a matter of a vector-like orientation between a desiring subject and the object of that desire, Jewett’s text instead suggests a notion of affinity predicated upon a subject’s manner of being situated relative to his environment, his community, the contours of his past. And whereas we tend to think of affect as belonging to a subject who feels, *Pointed Firs* gives us an affective register more akin to the diffuseness of atmospheric change, one that separates feeling from subjectivity, even from human agency, allowing emotion to impersonally persist in such a way that allows us to sense its finer gradations, its quiet shifts, its diminutions. In Dunnet Landing, gestures of minimal acknowledgment take the place of a

exchange of stories about personal life, and developed an alternative, masculine definition of intimacy, based on concealment rather than revelation, on distance rather than physical proximity, on silence rather than speech.” Although the latter three statements seem a reasonable (if limited) portrait of the narrator’s encounters with Elijah Tilley, their manifestation in *Pointed Firs* falls in a much more affirmative register than it does in the work of Thoreau (or at least in the work of Shamir’s Thoreau). Whereas Thoreau’s depersonalizing intimacy becomes a repudiation or negation of a more confessional intimacy, the Dunnet Landings’ version of the same seems not to take its alternatives into account. The narrator’s silence with Elijah Tilley is less a decision *not to talk* than it is *to remain silent*; they do not conceal some hidden interiority but instead show or reveal precisely through their shared reticence.

warm embrace, absent parties complicate the perhaps otherwise dyadic link shared by an afternoon's companions, and relation becomes as much about what it is to miss as what it is to meet.

Environmental Temporalities: Keeping Watch

In the introduction to *On Waiting*, a study of the trope of waiting – and the figure of the waiter – in texts as diverse as Bishop's "In the Waiting Room," Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and Homer's *The Odyssey*, Harold Schweizer describes the way that time manifests itself when one waits:

Lacking the charms of boredom or desire, waiting is neither interestingly melancholic nor despairingly romantic. Between hope and resignation, boredom and desire, fulfillment and futility, waiting extends across barren mental and emotional planes. Those who wander in it or through it find themselves in an exemplary existential predicament, having time without wanting it.

Although waiting rooms, train stations, airports, or hotel lobbies are merely to be passed through, I shall argue in this book that waiting is not simply a passage of time to be traversed. Although time is supposed to function like a door or a hall through which we pass unawares, in waiting, the door jams and the hall is endless. The hour does not pass. The line does not move. Time must suddenly be endured rather than traversed, felt rather than thought. In waiting, time is slow and thick. Waiting is more than a matter of time. Waiting has its rewards, as I want to argue here, though these seem perhaps as inconceivable as a visit to a door or a train station. And yet, we might think of waiting also as a temporary liberation from the economics of time-is-money, as a brief respite from the haste of modern life, as a meditative temporal space in which one might have unexpected intuitions and fortuitous insights. Waiting, as the French activist and philosopher Simone Weil advocates, must be relearned as a form of attention.²¹

If Elijah Tilley is known to us primarily as a watcher, then he is – through the same patterns of behavior – a paradigmatic waiter as well.²² His waiting, like his watching, is objectless; once his

²¹ Harold Schweizer, *On Waiting* (London: Routledge, 2008), 2. Hereafter cited in the text.

²² "Wait" and "watch," of course, are etymologically linked. I will return to this in the chapter's coda.

wife dies, that is to say, he continues waiting but stops *waiting for*.²³ And in this waiting (or in the narrator's witnessing of it), he makes legible the manner in which time passes throughout the narrator's stay. "In waiting, time is slow and thick," says Schweizer. The same could be said of Dunnet Landing as well. Early in her description of her summer, the narrator explains how "an hour was very long in that coast town where nothing stole away the shortest minute" (16). And as she sits with Elijah Tilley, she observes that in his attentiveness to his knitting, it seemed "as if he were hastily shortening the very thread of time. The minutes went slowly by."

The sheer thickness of time becomes manifest in the visit with Tilley through the manner in which – and the extent to which – continuity is rendered legible. The arrival of the narrator to Tilley's house does little if anything to affect his scene of waiting. The most insistent words in the scene are "same" and "alone"; Tilley's habitual watching is not one that could be redeemed or ended by an object – instead, it turns objectlessness itself into a vista worthy of attention. And what the narrator does in turn is just that: she attends (and attends to) his watch; like an isolated sail that, if spotted, would not end the watch but instead simply confirm it, her presence acknowledges Tilley's mode of distant companioning and persistent, atmospheric waiting without altering it. Indeed, the structure of the scene itself is governed by patterns of non-interruption, of calling attention to continuity itself. In other words: the narrator is welcomed into Tilley's midst not because of how she affects the patterns of his daily watch but rather because of the difference she fails to make. His life is defined by a recursive perpetuity whose patterns she simply echoes or adopts: He tries "to keep things looking right." He "[keeps] a-watchin' them doors as if she might step in." He "[keeps] a-lookin off an' droppin' [his] stitches." The narrator, in keeping with his keeping, "[keeps] the afternoon watch with him." Likewise, his actions

²³ This paradigm of objectless waiting will become central to the argument of Chapter Two.

constitute a kind of refrain whose only variation comes from the flexibility of English prepositions: He “looked out the window.” He kept “a-lookin’ off.” He “did not look up.” “At last he looked up.” And the narrator, in response to his command, passes the afternoon in a chair by his side, from which she can “look off an’ see the water.” The change within the afternoon comes simply from the directionality of the gaze, from whether Tilley is looking out, or off, or up (or not).²⁴ Importantly, he is never looking *at* or even *for*; instead, his watch travels in a kind of hermetic circuit, radiating out from and around him in a manner that becomes as fundamental an element of his atmosphere as the fog that rolls off the sea.

Tilley’s loneliness is a persistent and continual force; just as his neighbors’ insistence that “time would ease [him]” has been proven wrong by the daily “sameness” of his missing, the sheer difficulty of disruption is further highlighted by syntactic elements of the scene. The stuttering repetition of Tilley’s self-narration – “I keep a-watchin’...I keep a-lookin’,” “that’s just how it seems.... Yes, ma’am, that’s just how it seems to me” – grants his sense of resignation a kind of rhetorical density akin to the visual density achieved by the figures of the Waiting Place, who, “thick” in their dwellings and “gathered” in their companies, come to constitute a figure for illegibility itself. Likewise, even the (few) paradigms of hope within Tilley’s story (and life) serve to reinforce the scene’s hermetic feel. The only time his language departs from the perpetual narrative present in which it typically dwells (“I try to keep...,” “I

²⁴ The extent to which the flexibility of English prepositions yields the only dynamism (and perhaps, by extension, the only marked affects) in the scene is reminiscent of comments that Denise Riley makes in the introduction to *Impersonal Passion*, where she takes up the question of how “language as the voice of its occasion can also inflect its speakers.” In attempting to solve “the difficulty...of naming this aspect of the life of language, if it’s no longer to be held hard bound in the narrows of semantic meaning, nor, as a reaction, abandoned to babbling frilliness,” she turns to a series of writers, including William James, who once suggested: “‘We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of blue or a feeling of cold’” (Riley 2). Indeed, in the scene with Elijah Tilley, it seems as if we need to find a descriptive language for the feeling of *off* and the feeling of *at* and the feeling of *up* – for all the ways in which prepositional stances (and the modes of relating that they depict) come to bear affective resonance.

miss her just the same every day...,” “I keep a-lookin’....”) comes with an assertion of will and futurity from his past – “I said I was goin’ to make shift” - which immediately turns back on itself in a kind of closed completion – “and I have made shift.” Furthermore, the structure of the scene serves to highlight the seemingly perpetual state of non-interruption that governs Tilley’s days; two lengthy paragraphs about the experience of missing “poor dear” are “interrupted” by a stand-alone sentence that does nothing but affirm the lack of interruption: “I did not say anything, and he did not look up.”

Indeed, *Pointed Firs* is full of scenes where interruptions of various sorts pass unheeded, and do little but reinforce the persistence of the scenes they would ordinarily seem to disrupt. The paradigmatic scene of non-disruptive interruption comes when Mrs. Fosdick and Mrs. Todd begin to tell the inquisitive narrator the story of Poor Joanna, and are interrupted by a knock on the door. The resulting scene is composed of gestures of continuity where we would expect disruption, and invocations of the distant past even when immediate concerns seem to make their presence felt:

My companions and I had been so intent upon the subject of conversation that we had not heard any one open the gate, but at this moment, above the sound of the rain, we heard a loud knocking. We were all startled as we sat by the fire, and Mrs. Todd rose hastily and went to answer the call, leaving her rocking-chair in violent motion. Mrs. Fosdick and I heard an anxious voice at the door speaking of a sick child, and Mrs. Todd’s kind, motherly voice inviting the messenger in: then we waited in silence. There was a sound of heavy dropping of rain from the eaves, and the distant roar and undertone of the sea. My thoughts flew back to the lonely woman on her outer island; what separation from humankind she must have felt, what terror and sadness, even in a summer storm like this!

“You send right after the doctor if she ain’t better in half an hour,” said Mrs. Todd to her worried customer as they parted; and I felt a warm sense of comfort in the evident resources of even so small a neighborhood, but for the poor hermit Joanna there was no neighbor on a winter night.

“How did she look?” demanded Mrs. Fosdick, without preface, as our large hostess returned to the little room with a mist about her from standing long in the wet doorway, and the sudden draught of her coming beat out the smoke and flame from the Franklin stove. “How did poor Joanna look?”

“She was the same as ever, except I thought she looked smaller,” answered Mrs. Todd after thinking a moment; perhaps it was only a last considering thought about her patient. “Yes, she was just the same, and looked very nice, Joanna did. I had been married since she left home, an’ she treated me like her own folks. I expected she’d look strange, with her hair turned gray in a night or somethin’, but she wore a pretty gingham dress I’d often seen her wear before she went away; she must have kept it nice for best in the afternoons. (72-73)

Most striking here is how the presence of the frantic mother – a present-day neighbor whose crisis interrupts a story focused on community – does little to disrupt the characters’ retrospective reverie, and in fact itself becomes rolled into the distant backward view that dominates the conversation.²⁵ The initial incursion of the knock pulls the lexicon into a fevered realm, from a persistent state whose emotional register was no louder than “the sound of the rain” to a scene involving a “startled” group, a “[hasty]” rise, and a “violent” departure. But as with Elijah Tilley, where the statement of (non-)interruption simply serves to highlight the persistence of the watch, here the advent of intensity serves simply to illuminate the enduring ambient qualities both of the immediate surrounds and of the story being told. As the narrator sits

²⁵ The subsuming of the acute concerns of the parent within the temporality of the childless happens throughout *Pointed Firs*. Aside from Mrs. Blackett, none of the central figures in *Pointed Firs* have children, and this childlessness becomes a defining facet of their characters. To provide just one example of how this fact matters both thematically and formally, as the narrator’s contingent leaves the Bowden family reunion, she comments that “most of our companions had been full of anxious thoughts of home, - of the cows, or of young children likely to fall into disaster, - but we had no reasons for haste, and drove slowly along, talking and resting by the way” (111). Once again, their status as spinsters (or widows, or solitary women with grown children) changes their relationship to space and time; distant from the paradigms of worry and productivity that seem likely to dominate a household concerned with (child- or animal-) rearing, they are able to loiter and linger and wanderer, to inhabit the present – and the natural environment – in a more expansive way. Detached from the questions of futurity inherently linked to the responsibilities of parenthood, their present becomes a space as perpetual – and as uninterrupted – as the largely unchanging patterns of relation and aloofness which dominate their interpersonal lives. Changed too are the paradigms of (non-)interruption which govern the scene; whereas in other episodes, perpetual states are interrupted by discrete actions (the illumination of Green Island interrupting the act of looking off at a day’s gray contours, Mrs. Fosdick’s arrival appearing like a strange sail on the horizon of a comfortable Dunnet Landing routine), here a relatively discrete or time-limited act (“we...drove slowly along”) is interrupted by a set of perpetual, progressive behaviors (“talking and resting by the way”). This inversion, it seems, is paradigmatically Dunnet Landing: eventfulness is disrupted and overtaken by a quiet perpetuity, gestures of change are overwhelmed by the impetus for things – and relations – to remain now as they always have been. I will return to the relationship between Jewett’s frantic mother and childless spinsters in my conclusion.

silently in the wake of Mrs. Todd's departure, listening to the layered sounds of the Dunnet Landing evening, the "distant roar and undertone of the sea" pulls her thoughts back to the temporally distant situation of Joanna. When Mrs. Todd finally returns to the room, carrying the evening's atmosphere on her broad frame, Mrs. Fosdick immediately asks a question that seems finally to bring the conversation into the same present tense as the mist and "sudden draught" which envelop Mrs. Todd's body: "How did she look?" And yet what initially reads as an acknowledgment of the desperate woman's interruption, a willingness to bring the conversation into the company of that evening's events rather than simply repeating narratives of a world far removed, instead becomes a way of denying precisely such immediacy. Mrs. Fosdick's subsequent repetition and clarification of her question – "How did Poor Joanna look?" – becomes a mode of effacing the patient's incursion into the scene, of using present tense events simply to affirm the persistent presence of the narrative, retrospective, distant ground that it interrupts. Like Tilley's stuttering refrains, which grant his commitment to the past a kind of thickness or dimensionality, Mrs. Fosdick's stuttering interrogative syntactically performs the pull that the past exerts on the women's collective present tense.²⁶

And as if in a kind of variation on a theme, the resulting discussion of Poor Joanna itself centers around questions of surprising continuity; although Mrs. Todd expected her friend to

²⁶ And yet what seems like an odd refusal of immediacy is granted a kind of narratological sense by the framing of this episode. The knock on the door opens Chapter XIV, "The Hermitage." Chapter XIII, "Poor Joanna," closes with Mrs. Todd's describing her arrival on Shell-heap Island to visit Joanna: "It looked as if she might have gone over to the other side of the island. 'Twas neat and pretty all about the house, and a lovely day in July. We walked up from the beach together very sedate, and I felt for poor Nathan's little pin to see if 'twas safe in my dress pocket. All of a sudden Joanna come right to the fore door and stood there, not sayin' a word" (72). Whereas it seems an odd quirk of the narrator's and Mrs. Fosdick's to continue thinking of the long-dead Joanna in the face of the frantic mother's arrival, the structure of the text itself demands such a course. For the woman who knocks at the Dunnet Landing home comes to seem a mere echo of Poor Joanna "right [at] the fore door"; narratologically speaking, we are placed in a position where the present is likely to feel subordinate to the past, and where continuity is likely to trump immediacy.

have been altered by her radical retreat from society, she instead found her “the same as ever” – in fact, “just the same,” hardly “strange,” in a “dress [she’d] often seen her wear before she went away.” If Joanna’s person has been only minimally altered by a radical change in her life, then the same is true, oddly enough, for her relations, which seem not to have been compromised by her spatial and emotional retreat. As Mrs. Todd recalls a bit later in the conversation, on the day of Joanna’s funeral, “there wa’n’t hardly a boat on the coast within twenty miles that didn’t head for Shell-heap cram-full o’ folks an’ all real respectful, same’s if she’d always stayed ashore and held her friends” (78). Even the most radical gesture of all – Joanna’s seeming refusal of society – ultimately is enfolded into patterns of sameness. Joanna’s retreat, that is to say, becomes as much a mode of retaining connections as it is of refusing them; her absence is a difference that makes very little difference. What the language of the scene makes legible is persistence and continuance – is the process of *remaining*, even in one’s retreat.

This insistence on non-interruption is, among other things, a mode of making persistence legible and of making time itself – rather than the events that customarily fill it – felt.²⁷ The

²⁷ The question of how to make continuance or persistence legible is a common one throughout nature writing – particularly in examples of nature description narrated by a reticent or self-effacing voice. In her *Grasmere Journal* (1800-1803), for example, Dorothy Wordsworth goes to the point of oddly insistent repetition in order to adequately represent a persistent weather pattern: “Friday 7th. A very rainy morning – it cleared up in the afternoon. We expected the Lloyds but they did not come. Wm still unwell. A rainy night. Saturday 8th November. A rainy morning – a whirlwind came that tossed about the leaves & tore off the still green leaves of the Ashes” (31). Wordsworth’s insistence on repetition as a means of indicating persistence suggests the extent to which change and variation – or, in other words, *event* – are the presumed terrain of nature writing. What she seems committed to portraying, by contrast, is the kind of persistence that in fact constitutes (her experience of a) landscape, the way in which reiterated paradigms become the founding ground of a life. Likewise, in some of the nature descriptions woven through her own letters, Jewett evinces a similar commitment to depicting what it means to persist or remain. In a September, 1880 missive to Annie Fields from Little Compton, Rhode Island, for instance, Jewett paints a veritable portrait of non-disruption - topographical, temporal, and psychological alike: “Dear Mrs. Fields, - This is not a land where it is easy to write letters. I can’t help being idle, except in thought, and I think I never knew so quiet a country. It is like all the places one goes on the way to sleep. There aren’t any high hills, but you look over the fields which are so like moors, and you look and look, and there is nothing you have to stop and wonder about, the big round-headed windmills are all still, and today is a grey day

minutes and hours and days that pass during the narrator's summer-long sojourn in Dunnet Landing gain their narrative thickness or resonance through the extent to which they become ambient; not filled by event but instead somehow *saturated with* or *companied by* atmospheric qualities, time in *Pointed Firs* comes to constitute – and be constituted by – the environment itself. Berthoff suggests that Jewett's "observation of setting – of the changes of the sea and sky, the colors of the landscape and the old buildings, the variety of scenes and views... is never used to claim for the immediate situation a feeling or an implication not already established in the human sphere; it fills naturally the pauses which mark the passing of time in a place with so much time on its hands" (151-152). As this formulation begins to make clear, the natural environment – and, indeed, environmentality itself – is for Jewett less an object than a way or a

which can't make up its mind to take the trouble to rain, and here we are sitting by the fireplace, and I was busy watching the smoke until I thought I would write a letter or two. And whether I drive or sail I am the most placid and serene of all your friends, and I forget that I ever was a girl who couldn't go to sleep at night" (12). The entire scene is a portrait of things that don't quite happen, and of existing states that don't quite end. The letter itself (and its act of composition) is the only interruption to the scene, bringing conclusion both to a long, wandering sentence immersed in its own gestures of perpetuity, and to the conditions which such a sentence seeks to depict: "...but you look over the fields which are so like moors, and you look and look, and there is nothing you have to stop and wonder about, the big round-headed windmills are all still, and today is a grey day which can't make up its mind to take the trouble to rain, and here we are sitting by the fireplace, and I was busy watching the smoke until I thought I would write a letter or two." The temporality of this sentence is radically indeterminate: the repeated sequence of "and"s lends a kind of syntactic and temporal parallelism to all of the conditions described, linking states which could just as easily co-exist as not, which could be understood either as a sequence of events or as a kind of gently alternating background and figure, scene and event. The decision to write the letter seems to have very little disruptive power in the insistently ambient dynamics of the day described; although it is the only reason why the words on the page even exist, the act of writing somehow still manages to seem a move of little consequence. Amidst a day when the windmills are still and the grey day can't even take the trouble to rain, and when "to drive or [to] sail" are equally inconsequential options, the "thought [that] I would write a letter or two" seems to inscribe only the most minimal sense of agency. It seems as though the letter might just as readily not exist, like the very paper might crumble before our eyes as we read. The letter itself – like the decision to write it – becomes as amorphous and as ephemeral as the greyness of the day and the smoke swirling within the fireplace; nothing in the scene emerges into something so marked as to be called "relief." Indeed, like the narrator's (seemingly interruptive) presence, which serves simply to confirm Elijah Tilley's watch, here the (only minimally acknowledged) act of writing serves simply to affirm (and to testify to) the kind of amorphous being-in-the-world which surrounds and undergirds it.

mode.²⁸ It not only fills or marks the time narratively (in a way that would render it little more than rhetorical device or embellishment) but also constitutes our experience *of* narrative time; amidst the kind of reticent relations and minimal happenings that become the book's episodes, the passing of time is marked not by events (or by the intervals between them) but rather by an objectless wait, by a muted vigilance, by a mode of attending to the world in its persistence and losses alike. Time comes to bear resonance not through the events that empty it (turning the potential of time into the contours of happening – in other words, what time can do or become) but rather for the ambience and persistent environmentality that fill it and grant it a shape. In the absence of fulfillment (the return of poor dear from death, the reuniting of Poor Joanna and the world), what we have is the watch. In the absence of event, what we have is the hour.

And in this attention to hour over event, or patient watch over dramatic fulfillment, *Pointed Firs* demonstrates how forces that typically constitute our sense of setting or background can be attended to without pulling them into the realm of figure or foreground. Throughout her work, in other words, Jewett allows us to feel the contours of time and place without insisting that they immediately resolve themselves into happening. In a letter to Thomas Bailey Aldrich written during a period of convalescence late in her life, Jewett described her own experience of watching and waiting in terms reminiscent of Tilley's. In his 1929 biography *Sarah Orne Jewett*, F.O. Matthiessen quotes from the letter, and then proceeds with an analysis that can help us read not only Jewett's autobiographical musings, but her literary work as well:

“[T]he doctor sternly packed me off a fortnight ago to-morrow to a ‘new place’ and one where I knew nobody and could stay out of doors. I had been here long ago and knew how good and salty the air was. The island was all my own for the first week, and I sat in the fir woods nearly all day, and read, or watched for an old capable partridge and her flock of chickens.” She found that any spot of country where there was a large still sky

²⁸ This once again recalls Jewett's transformation of person into mode in her diary description of Kate Birkhead.

and plenty of trees had a way of waiting quietly around her until she suddenly realized that she had become a piece of it, instead of a foreign substance thrown onto it by chance. If she kept to one place to go and sit, this feeling came faster, and things were always happening to amuse her: an ant with a crumb, a bird going up and down a limb, or a fluttering tree that stood in front of her until it grew to seem like a quiet person.²⁹

Although Jewett's letter places her in the position of watcher (for the partridge) and waiter (for her own recovery), Matthiessen's reading instead casts the landscape around her as the patient, waiting force.³⁰ Like Tilley's watch, which, though non-directed, is not non-efficacious (his poor dear may not return, but his friendship with the narrator burgeons), nature's process of intransitively "waiting around" Jewett creates for her a sense of belonging. The waiting yields a space in which intimacy can develop, unmarked, in which Jewett can come to belong to a place without explicitly trying to do so. This burgeoning intimacy, importantly, like the passage of time itself, is allowed to remain in the background; what the syntax of the paragraph encourages us to feel is not only the change itself but also *the space and time in which change can occur*. Jewett "found that any spot of country...had a way of *waiting quietly around her until* she

²⁹ F.O. Matthiessen, *Sarah Orne Jewett* (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1965), 123. Hereafter cited in the text. Interesting here too is the formulation of time at the start of the passage: "a fortnight ago to-morrow." This anticipatory retrospection, akin to the future anterior mode, is common not only throughout *Pointed Firs* (a topic to which I will return shortly) but also throughout all the texts of this project. The *will have been*, in fact, might be taken to be the preeminent tense of the spinster ecologist.

³⁰ This shift – where the watcher becomes the watched, or vice versa – is a commonplace in Jewett's writing as well. In "Miss Tempy's Watchers," the women appointed to keep watch over their late friend's body on the eve of her funeral come to feel that they are in fact the objects of another's gaze: "These words were spoken as if there were a third person listening; somebody beside Mrs. Crowe. The watchers could not rid their minds of the feeling that they were being watched themselves. The spring wind whistled in the window crack, now and then, and buffeted the little house in a gusty way that had a sort of companionable effect" (243). Later, the omniscient narrative voice wonders whether "Perhaps Tempy herself stood near, and saw her own life and its surroundings with new understanding. Perhaps she herself was the only watcher" (253). Likewise, in my own discussion of Elijah Tilley, he evolves from being a watched subject, liable to disappear upon a watcher's approach, to himself being a watcher (of long-disappeared objects). This shift from watcher to watch(ed) in some respects performs or engenders the intransitivity with which this chapter is concerned: by floating between the positions of subject and object, these characters never resolve into either; instead they are somehow suspended within the process of watching itself. Like poor dear's "poor," which becomes a statement of relationality more than a description of any one subject's condition, the experience of the watcher-becoming-watched (or vice versa, of course) makes the process of the watch one less directed than it is persistent.

suddenly realized that she had become a piece of it.” “If she kept to one place to go and sit, this feeling came faster, and things were always happening to amuse her: ...a fluttering tree that *stood in front of her until* it grew to seem like a quiet person.” We persist, that is to say, in the “waiting,” in the “[standing],” in the “until.”

Ultimately, making time’s passage legible through and as a kind of environmental watch corresponds to Jewett’s broader project of making background conditions (the weather; the environmental, atmospheric, or ambient qualities of a given location; the passage of time; the burgeoning of intimacy) legible precisely in or as their backgroundness, precisely in or as their refusal to be harnessed in the service of something else. This attention to the background (and to *backgroundness*) connects in turn to another notable phenomenon in *Pointed Firs*: the way in which the Dunnet Landingers’ slowly accumulative familiarity with the narrator (a familiarity to which we never quite have access) comes to bear environmental qualities. Although intimacy is accomplished or achieved repeatedly over the course of these pages – indeed, the plot, if there is one, seems centered on burgeoning friendships – rarely can we trace its trajectory. The narrator’s presence in Dunnet Landing bears a kind of invisible, benign influence. Perhaps because of the episodic form of the narrative, perhaps because of the narrator’s mode of observing and telling, perhaps because of precisely how she achieves her influence, we rarely see her gaining trust; we simply see trust gained. This is most true of her relationship with Mrs. Todd, who speaks with a kind of remorse when the narrator performs the gesture of retreat through which she appears in the narrative: “‘Well, dear,’ she said sorrowfully, ‘I’ve took great advantage o’ your bein’ here. I ain’t had such a season for years, but I have never had nobody I

could so trust” (7). Trust built is revealed but trust building, by and large, is not.³¹ This quiet creeping up of intimacy, of friendship, of belonging may be the affirmative, interpersonal equivalent of the slow (and, in her context, insidious) temporality of environmental degradation that Carson seeks to make legible in *Silent Spring*. Emotion simply exists and burgeons until it reaches the point of being noticeable; characters gain intimacy with one another through repeated exposure, and we gain familiarity with them through their repeated appearance in otherwise distinct episodes. Once again, what we feel is time itself, not what becomes in or within it; what becomes important here, again, is Matthiessen’s *until*.

Indeed, like Matthiessen’s rendering, *Pointed Firs* rarely allows us to concern ourselves with outcome or end, emphasizing instead the slow and somehow indistinct passage of time – and the extent to which environmentality or ambience is how that time comes to be felt. Within the world of Dunnet Landing, experience, intimacy, and eventfulness become a function of belatedness and aftermath; from the novel’s opening page, we get the sense that everything that the narrator lives and tells occurs in the wake of an unarticulated past experience.³² This importance of the outside persists throughout *Pointed Firs*; the narrator’s attention frequently

³¹ For more on building and sustaining trust, see Annette C. Baier, *Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1994), particularly chapters 7 and 8.

³² The title of the first chapter is “The Return,” a heading seemingly more logical for the novel’s end, suggesting as it does the recapitulation of a prior experience – an experience that in this case implicitly dwells beyond the text’s bounds. And, indeed, this chapter predicates the narrator’s motivation for traveling to Dunnet Landing on a series of events – on a process of acquaintance – to which we do not and cannot have access: “After a brief visit made two or three summers before in the course of a yachting cruise, a lover of Dunnet Landing returned to find the unchanged shores of the pointed firs, the same quaintness of the village with its elaborate conventionalities; all the mixture of remoteness, and childish certainty of being the centre of civilization which her affectionate dreams had told” (2). Although the emphasis of this passage falls on the sense of steadfast perpetuity – on the charm of a town that can be visited time and time again in much the same way – this “sameness” resonates with meaning only because of its temporal belatedness, because the return visit, though distanced from the original, repeats its predecessor in important ways. Even the notion of “same” is itself fundamentally a belated one, dependent as it is on a kind of recapitulation that allows a second to be identical to a first. And so even before we witness the first event – the narrator’s arrival – we are made aware of all that we have missed, that this narrated trip is colored by the specter of a journey we will never see.

lingers beyond what would customarily seem the bounds of an event in order to record aftermath: the falling silent, the process of disengagement, the series of quiet non-happenings that inevitably follows any series of quiet happenings. Although the chapters (or sketches) of the book typically revolve around visits of one form or another (the narrator and Mrs. Todd travel deep inland or off shore to an island, a far-off friend comes to visit them, etc.), the events that might customarily be understood to define those scenes are often bracketed by – and rendered subordinate to – the environmental descriptions that punctuate each chapter. The most dramatic episode of the book – the narrative of and pilgrimage to the life of Poor Joanna – begins in distinctly non-dramatic form, with a careful description of the atmospheric confines of a Dunnet Landing night:

One evening my ears caught a mysterious allusion which Mrs. Todd made to Shell-heap Island. It was a chilly night of cold northeasterly rain, and I made a fire for the first time in the Franklin stove in my room, and begged my two housemates to come in and keep me company. The weather had convinced Mrs. Todd that it was time to make a supply of cough-drops, and she had been bringing forth herbs from dark and dry hiding-places, until now the pungent odor of them had resolved themselves into one mighty flavor of spearmint that came from a simmering caldron of syrup in the kitchen. (62)

Just as the affect surrounding Poor Joanna elsewhere in this chapter bears no more distinctness than the scent of the herbs circulated around the yard by Mrs. Todd's heavy step, here her story seems to emerge from – and be part and parcel with – the evening's weather. The narrator's ears catch an allusion to Shell-heap Island as her nose catches the "mighty flavor" of peppermint from the simmering caldron, and her body catches the warmth of the stove to combat the chill from the rain. The story of Poor Joanna is no more separate from the dailiness of life in Dunnet Landing than the dampness in Mrs. Todd's house is from the cold northeasterly rain beyond its walls; the events that occur within this scene can be said to emerge naturally from it. The telling of Poor Joanna's story and the narrator's subsequent visit to her island, that is to say, resolve

themselves out of the atmosphere of this night like the pungent odor of Mrs. Todd's herbs "[resolve] themselves into one mighty flavor of spearmint."

The constitutive importance of environment and atmosphere to the events of *Pointed Firs* is even more marked at the close of chapters, where visits and stories tend to unfold back into the sensory perceptions of a given location – as if the simmering caldron's spearmint dissolved back into the pungent odor of herbs culled from dark and dry places. Ch.XI, "The Old Singers," which brings to a close the four-chapter visit to Mrs. Todd's island home, concludes not on Green Island itself but back in Dunnet Landing, with the narrator once again awash in the town's ambience: "I never shall forget the day at Green Island. The town of Dunnet Landing seemed large and noisy and oppressive as we came ashore. Such is the power of contrast, for the village was so still that I could hear the shy whippoorwills singing that night as I lay awake in my downstairs bedroom, and the scent of Mrs. Todd's herb garden under the window blew in again and again with every gentle rising of the seabreeze" (54-55). Rather than dissipating the chapters' cultivated sense of happening (however minimal it may be), the ambient descriptions that inevitably conclude those chapters serve to expand those happenings' bounds. The return becomes as important as (if not more important than) the visit. The sound of the whippoorwills and the scent of the herbs become as important as the carriage of a boat on the sea. There is nothing particularly culminating in these ambient scenes; rather than bringing to the chapters a distinct conclusion, these descriptions of sight and sound and smell engender a sense of extension, immerse us in the medial. Indeed, we keep time in *Pointed Firs* not by keeping track of events or journeys or calendar days, but instead through attending to the rhythms of the natural world: through the way in which the sound of the whippoorwills engenders and fills *evening*, through the extent to which the gentle rising of the seabreeze comes to spell *summer*,

through the fact that the “cool and damp” morning within which the final chapter’s events transpire comes to spell *summer’s end*.

And perhaps not surprisingly, given the text’s focus on redefining paradigms of intimacy, meaningful acquaintanceship often is both fostered and revealed in these intervals that other narratives likely would elide. As the narrator leaves Elijah Tilley’s presence after her afternoon visit, she turns to gaze back at the worn sailor’s worn home: “As I looked back from the lower end of the field I saw him still standing, a lonely figure in the doorway. ‘Poor dear,’ I repeated to myself half aloud: ‘I wonder where she is and what she knows of the little world she left. I wonder what she has been doing these eight years!’” (127) Although the narrator does not meet her newfound friend’s gaze, she nevertheless reveals the capacity for empathy that has developed, quietly, in the course of their visit. For when she looks at him and sees his vacant stare, she thinks not of him but of his thoughts, of the absent woman whom she knows dominates his sight and imagination alike. This diminishment of immediacy and deferral of significance applies not only to the broad episodes or sketches of *Pointed Firs*, but also to discrete moments within them; although the scale of these moments is different, however, their attention to vision and receptivity persists. In the narrator’s exchange with Captain Littlepage, for instance, the aftermath of conversation looms as large as does the man’s supernatural tale. After he reaches an apparent stopping point in his story, the chapter – and the narrator’s attention – continues: “There was a silence in the schoolhouse, but we could hear the noise of the water on the beach below. It sounded like the strange warning wave that gives notice of the turn of the tide. A late golden robin, with the most joyful and eager of voices, was singing close by in a thicket of wild roses” (21). Similarly, when Littlepage reaches the end of the story, the narrator continues her rendering of his rendering past the bounds of his words:

I assented absent-mindedly, thinking more just then of my companion's alert, determined look and the seafaring, ready aspect that had come to his face; but at this moment there fell a sudden change, and the old, pathetic, scholarly look returned. Behind me hung a map of North America, and I saw, as I turned a little, that his eyes were fixed upon the northernmost regions and their careful recent outlines with a look of bewilderment. (27)

There is an ambience of vacation in both of these scenes – vacation not in the sense of tourism or travel, but in its more literal counterpart, in the sense of suspension, cessation, reprieve. Both focus on what happens when little seems to be happening – when the silence in the schoolhouse allows the narrator to “hear the noise of the water on the beach below” and when a watcher watches another watcher watch, is able to see one “look” subtly fade into another. If there is a non-happening that becomes a site of happening here, it lies in the subtle changes in the elderly man's vision, in the shift from alertness to self-alienation that the narrator not only notes but also relays.

In his discussion of tone in *Ecology Without Nature*, Timothy Morton helpfully accounts for the way in which “ambience [becomes] an expansion of the time-space continuum in a work, to the point at which time comes to a standstill”:

Vivid description slows down or suspends narrative time. Let us distinguish between *plot* – the events of a narrative in a chronological sequence – and *story* – the events in the order in which the narrator tells them. Suppose that in the plot, event B follows event A after an interval of five seconds, but that in the story an intervening ekphrasis is inserted that takes several pages for the reader to get through, such as Homer's description of Achilles' shield during the intense description of battle at the end of the *Iliad*. The effect on the reader is that the time of narration is held in stasis. In narrative, suspension occurs when the time of the plot (the events as they would have occurred in “real time”) diverges widely from the time of the story (the events as they are narrated).

In the second decade of the nineteenth century, Sir Thomas Raffles enjoyed the repetitive music of the Indonesian gamelan, and Leonhard Huizenga later declared, “It is a ‘state,’ such as moonlight poured over the fields.” Static sound became a basis of contemporary music, as composers such as Claude Debussy incorporated into their compositions what they had learned from the gamelan since its appearance at the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris (1889). Stasis becomes audible in musical *suspension*, where one layer of sound changes more slowly than another layer. Disco music compels dancers to stay on the dance floor not only because it involves repetitive beats, but also because it sustains suspended chords that do not progress from A to B, but remain “in between” without

resolution. This can only be a matter of semblance, even in visual art. Since repetition is itself a function of difference, funk, then disco, then hip-hop, then house, were progressively able to mine even more deeply the basic blues structure for a sweet spot, a suspended chord pulsating in rhythmic space. Tone is another word for this sweet spot, somewhere within the third part of a four-part blues, always near the resolution but never quite making it. This is how ambience enters the time dimension. Tone is a matter of quantity, whether of rhythm or imagery: strictly speaking, the amplitude of vibrations. (43, 44-45)

Although we perhaps could imagine few things less akin to the quiet mannerisms of Dunnet Landing than the insistent beats of a disco dance floor, Morton's description of layering and suspension can help us to understand the role of ambient description within the temporal register of *Pointed Firs*. For, like the repetitive music of the gamelan, Jewett's writing comes to feel like "a 'state,' such as moonlight poured over the fields." (In fact, I can think of few more apt descriptors.)

Saying that Jewett's prose *makes time felt* is perhaps just another way of saying that it *makes stasis audible* (or, in this case, legible); and, as in Morton's musical examples, Jewett's prose achieves this kind of productive suspension in part through its layering of sounds. The thickness of time – and the fact of temporal suspension – is felt, for instance, when the narrator sits in the schoolhouse with Captain Littlepage and observes that "[t]here was a silence in the schoolhouse, but we could hear the noise of the water on a beach below. It sounded like the strange warning wave that gives notice of the turn of the tide. A late golden robin, with the most joyful and eager of voices, was singing close by in a thicket of wild roses. (21) Part of the effect here – unlike, perhaps, in disco – comes from temporal mismatch, from the extent to which the linearity of narrative cannot fully express or represent the simultaneity or layering of sensory experience. And part of it, too, comes from the extent to which this shift in narrative time – from the progression of plot to the stasis of layered description – is not (as in the case of *The Iliad*) a matter of interruption, but instead constitutes the book's primary mode. *Pointed Firs*, in other

words, is so full of such suspensions, of such ambiently layered moments, that they become constitutive of its movement through narrative time and its representation of the world. Later in the same discussion, Morton writes: “[Thomas] De Quincey theorizes how, from the reader’s (or listener’s, or dancer’s) point of view, tone gives us pause. This pausing is not a mere hiatus or stopping. It is rather a staying-in-place endowed with its own intensity. There is ‘not much going on,’ which is not the same as no information at all. We are thrown back on the here-and-now of bodily sensation” (46-47). Although *Pointed Firs* is a book whose narrative is predicated on travel – the urban narrator’s summer in small-town Dunnet Landing – and whose events, such that they are, are predicated on visits and journeys of various sorts, it coheres not because of these patterns of motion but rather because of the consistency with which its writing both depicts and becomes a “staying-in-place endowed with its own intensity.” And this intensity, interestingly enough, manifests itself as nothing other than a form of mutedness, that minimal acknowledgment which I earlier acknowledged as the book’s predominant tone. When tone enters the time dimension in *Pointed Firs*, when ambience marks the point at which time comes to a standstill, we feel the “amplitude of vibrations” not in terms of cacophony but in terms of layered quietnesses: as the robin atop the distant wave atop the silence. Such sounds – barely audible, barely distinguishable – are where time in *Pointed Firs* can be said to rest.

Persistence and Loss

This emphasis on ambience creates a paradigm in which events extend beyond their usual bounds, significance is deferred, and belatedness cannot be conflated with “too-lateness.” Even when – perhaps particularly when – the diffusely extended bounds of an event fail to incorporate an additional occurrence, Jewett incorporates this aftermath into her narrative structure, creating

a fluid continuum between discrete event and apparent non-happening. Addressing the melancholic qualities of what he calls ambient poetics, Morton writes:

The moment of contact is always in the past. In this sense we never actually have or inhabit it. We posit it afterward. An echo can only reach our ears after the sound has caused the medium to vibrate. According to the theory of relativity, all perceptual phenomena exist in the past, reaching our senses at a later date – even light, even gravity, which Newton thought was instantaneous. So the uncanny, future-anterior, retroactive – and, moreover, melancholic – qualities of ambient poetics are, ironically, accurate. They track the inevitable too-lateness of the way in which things arise. This point becomes very important when we assess why environmental writing is at such pains to convey a sense of immediacy. (76)

If the writing and approach that Morton addresses (and ultimately critiques) takes pains to represent a kind of efficacious (or potentially efficacious) immediacy, then Jewett's writing does just the opposite, slowing down and making mute not so as to raise the non-event to the status of event, it seems, but instead to suggest a kind of flattening of significance throughout, as if to reveal that moments are – that life is – quieter than they often seem. Like William Wordsworth, whose emphasis on remembered events in "Lines Composed Upon Tintern Abbey" (and elsewhere) suggests that we can think about belatedness and preservation differently, Jewett's writing here subtly implies that what is saved or preserved or codified is perhaps no more important than what is left to dissipate and unravel – or, perhaps, that those two processes (preserving and unraveling) are in fact not as opposed as we have come to believe.

This more capacious definition of eventfulness (more sensitive to the muted happenings or minimal environmental changes that could be understood to constitute "event," more expansive in the temporal bounds that can be said to delimit any given scene or encounter, more acutely aware of the complicated relationship between preserving and unraveling) means that very little in *Pointed Firs* (or Dunnet Landing) can be said to definitively happen. We, like the Dunnet Landings, dwell in the realm of aftermath, either because the event itself has been

elided (we don't see or even learn of the discrete moments of poor dear's death, we simply know come to know her deadness) or because whatever minimal change or development an event can be said to have precipitated does not emerge until after the normal bounds of a scene have closed (the narrator returns to the suddenly noisy confines of Dunnet Landing from Green Island, she turns back toward Elijah Tilley's house and feels a pang of empathy for his longing for poor dear). Dunnet Landing is understood in terms of conditions (deadness, isolation, quiet) rather than events (death, retreat, falling silent); as a result, any futurity that the town and its characters can be understood to have emerges in the register of the future anterior – not that something will happen, but rather that it *will have happened*, that the characters will, at some point, dwell in its aftermath.

At the end of the book, as she looks at the now-empty room that she has inhabited at Mrs. Todd's house throughout her summer stay, the narrator comes not only to understand but also to inhabit the town's ambient investment in aftermath, in the dead, and in the long gone: "When I went in again the little house had suddenly grown lonely, and my room looked empty as it had the day I came. I and all of my belongings had died out of it, and I knew now how it would seem when Mrs. Todd came back and found her lodger gone. So we die before our own eyes; so we see some chapters of our lives come to their natural end" (130-131). Once again, there is an integral link between objects and human emotion; the narrator and her belongings "[die] out" of the house in tandem, a pairing which evinces Brown's belief in the extent to which persons and objects switch places (or come to resemble each other) in *Pointed Firs*. And so too, there is once again less emphasis on the experience of the one who has died than there is on the one(s) who will survive; the narrator pays little heed to the emotions that she feels in the wake of this "death," instead focusing on the extent to which it allows her to empathize with what Mrs. Todd

will feel when she returns to her home to find her lodger gone. “Death” becomes not the bodily act of a single, autonomous subject but instead the ground for relationality and continuing empathy *between* subjects. Likewise, affect in the scene seems to float free of familiar agency; to say that the house is “lonely” without the narrator’s belongings and presence is to articulate not only its (personified) condition of being without her, but also her condition of being without it – and the extent to which those two states inform or echo one another. This loneliness, like Denise Riley’s, is not something that the narrator rues; instead, just as the house being “cool and damp in the morning” calls her summer to its seasonal close, she casts her symbolic death itself as being the means by which (or manner in which) this chapter of her life “come[s] to [its] natural end.”

And in keeping with an emphasis on seasonality, atmosphere, and the “natural” flow of things, what the narrator feels (consistent with the other descriptions of death in Dunnet Landing) is the extent to which death comes to characterize and grant shape to the world of the living; the description that her belongings “had died out of” her small room serves not only to give some sense of the space’s emptiness but also to grant that emptiness a kind of richness or ambience. Her one-time inhabitation of the space remains, somehow invisibly embodied; like the layered sounds (the birds, the sea, the silence) that so often constitute Jewett’s descriptions of the Dunnet Landing atmosphere, the current emptiness or silence of the room is layered upon the vivacity which once characterized it. Her disappearance, like that of the Waiting Place figures lost to sight, grants invisibility a thickness or dimensionality all its own. What remains in the room, in other words, is not emptiness but the fact that she was there and the fact that she has left – an absence rich with the ambience of its past(s).

Importantly, it is *after* she and her belongings have “died” out of Dunnet Landing that Elijah Tilley is able to make the most direct (if still characteristically minimal) acknowledgment of the narrator’s presence; as she sails away from Dunnet Landing, her boat passes a fisherman whose posture she readily recognizes:

Out in the main channel we passed a bent-shouldered old fisherman bound for the evening round among his lobster traps. He was toiling along with short oars, and the dory tossed and sank and tossed again with the steamer’s waves. I saw that it was old Elijah Tilley, and though we had so long been strangers we had come to be warm friends, and I wished that he had waited for one of his mates, it was such hard work to row along shore through rough seas and tend the traps alone. As we passed I waved my hand and tried to call to him, and he looked up and answered my farewells by a solemn nod. (132)

The final interpersonal gesture of the book is a distinctly non-reciprocal episode of mutual acknowledgment; the narrator’s (relatively) exuberant gestures of farewell are met by the man’s “solemn nod.” But this nod, we quickly realize, is the most explicit act of friendship that the narrator has received from the seafarer, far more marked than the gesture of moving the haddock from one hand to another that alerted the narrator to their burgeoning friendship, or than the act of persistent forgetting, which told the narrator that she was an appropriately non-disruptive presence in the seafarer’s midst. It is as if, in departing, in fading, in “dying” before her own (and others’) eyes, the narrator has become intelligible or accessible to Elijah Tilley in a way that she simply had not been before. Like him, and like his “poor dear,” she has become legible in and as her disappearance. And this nod, we also notice, not only becomes a sign of the “[warmth]” that has grown between the “friends,” but also retains traces of the fact that the two were, for “so long,” “strangers” to one another. At the end of the narrator’s (and our own) Dunnet Landing experience, in other words, we witness an interaction paradigmatic of the town’s forms of intimacy: one where strangeness and warmth coexist, one where minimal acknowledgment

becomes a sign of intimacy, one where asymmetry or non-reciprocity is not a rejection or a rebuke but instead indicates an affinity as strong as any other.

The narrator, in other words (like Poor Joanna, like the Poor Dear), promises to persist for the Dunnet Landingers both in and as her goneness. The text's emphasis on persistence and perpetuation is hence not the same as an impulse to preservation, a distinction particularly important with regard to the text's environmental(ist) resonances. In her discussion of *Pointed Firs*, Stephanie Foote aligns what she views as Jewett's preservationism with the conservative leanings of regionalist writing:

Perhaps more than other regional writers, Jewett amplifies the traditionally valued concerns of regionalism. This amplification comes from the text's overt nostalgia, its persistent, though veiled, gestures toward an outer world that may be read as the embodiment of nineteenth-century history threatening to destroy the world of Dunnet Landing. Amid even the slow cadences of life in the village, the narrator manages to impart a sense of urgency about her own project of collecting and arranging folklore and folkways. This urgency is not simply a result of the knowledge of village decline that readers bring to regionalist fiction – any reader might note that nostalgia is already a factor in Dunnet Landing citizens' perception of themselves. Instead, charting the path of the stranger – here the narrator – demonstrates various kinds of estrangement by showing that a regional American may be a foreigner, an exotic curio, *and* a safe regional type.³³

Although her reading more broadly seeks to expand how we understand the possible political stakes of an insular genre like regionalism, Foote here predicates her argument on a commonplace assumption about local color writing: its pervasive sense of nostalgia, and its (author's or characters') insistent desire to collect and arrange curios of a fading culture, a soon-to-be past. And so she transforms the (muted, minimalistic) narrator into a fevered ethnographer, a quintessential participant-observer racing the sands of time as she seeks to “[collect] and [arrange]” the Dunnet Landingers' fading ways of life. Although the small town Mainers become, in Foote's reading of the narrator's behavior, more than simply “exotic curios,” that

³³ Stephanie Foote, *Regional Fictions: Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2001), 20-21. Hereafter cited in the text.

remains one of their chief identifying marks.³⁴ And while their folkways may be on the verge of extinction (leading to the nostalgia which Foote somewhat dismissively presumes “any reader might note” in the text), it remains the task of the narrator – according to the dictates of regional writing – to collect, preserve, and codify their quaintness in the face of a changing world.³⁵ Likewise, Donna Campbell views the plot, themes, and rhetorical techniques of *Pointed Firs* within the context of a genre determined to resist the incursions of time:

A...characteristic of local color works, and one related to self-denial, is the deliberate conservation of experience, of suspending time through preserving it, that encompasses both a theme and a mode of storytelling in local color fiction. Much of the action in local color stories centers on these activities of preserving and storytelling. Gathering herbs, knitting, making quilts, braiding rugs, distilling essences, and putting up preserves take up a great deal of the women’s time, just as storytelling occupies their attention. The parallel between the two goes beyond simple contiguity, however: each is a method of preserving the present for the future, of making and reshaping something into a *useable* and durable object to be shared.³⁶

Although this list of activities – writerly and otherwise – initially seems to fit the work of *Pointed Firs*, the difference between the narrator’s (or Jewett’s) practices and the gestures of preservation that Campbell discusses emerges, once again, from the former’s lack of emphasis on objects. Whereas the task of preservation is quantitative – saving this many objects or acres or species of trees – the work of persistence is instead qualitative – a matter of quality or amplitude or tone.

³⁴ Although *Pointed Firs* does itself depict characters making shrines and preserving curios, such practices almost always reflect a sense of continuing or evolving relation than they do a rendering static of lives once lived. I am thinking here not only of Elijah Tilley’s shrine to his poor dear – which, as Brown points out (see FN 21), allows Tilley to learn more about her even after her death – but also of an object like the coral pin that Mrs. Todd’s husband had brought back from sea for Poor Joanna – a circulating curio that Mrs. Todd ultimately leaves behind for the narrator at the end of the book as a token of their friendship.

³⁵ I will return to these questions of extinction within the context of my conclusion’s discussion of regionalism, environmentalism, and terminality.

³⁶ Donna Campbell, *Resisting Regionalism: Gender and Naturalism in American Fiction, 1885-1915* (Athens: Ohio U P, 1997), 41. Hereafter cited in the text.

What matters with regard to the future is not *what* will endure (acres, objects, species) but rather *how* – *how* the work of persistence (or oblique transmission) will occur, *how* what remains will (come to) remain. In this, the Dunnet Landingers’ relation to the future feels akin to what François describes as John Berger’s “emphasis on continuity without increase – this peculiar orientation toward time to come that wants nothing for the future but the by no means easy, automatic or guaranteed transmission of past practice.” For Berger, she argues, this practice “is inseparable from the lack of lasting monuments and absence of permanent (mechanically reproducible) works of art that characterize peasant culture – as if because nothing in particular is preserved, no work of art is produced and put behind glass, to be kept intact, immutable and safe from the ravages of time, the work of preservation is never over.”³⁷ And this work of preservation (both Berger’s peasants’ and the Dunnet Landingers’), importantly, is not a mode of permanence, is not a way of wrenching a community out of the current of time; instead, the forms of continuance that Jewett depicts are as concerned with acknowledging loss as they are about preventing or foreclosing it.

In other words: gestures of maintenance are not always (perhaps even not often) linear or monolithic. What is done is hardly ever immune from being undone. Whereas Campbell places tasks like knitting and braiding on the side of steadfast preservation (work responsible for “suspending time through preserving it”), Jewett’s text instead treats such practices in a manner more reminiscent of what François deems “the impossibility of putting longevity on one side and transience (openness to chance and contingency) on the other” – a paradigm related to the familiar environmentalist impulse to “mak[e] no change so great or irreversible” that – as if we were all Penelopes – “it can’t be undone the next night.” In the case of *The Odyssey*, of course,

³⁷ Anne-Lise François, “‘Camping as for a Night’: Sojourning without Reserve with Thoreau, Serres, and Benjamin,” International Conference on Romanticism (ICR), New York, November 2009. (Unpublished.)

Penelope's unmaking is as integral to her task as is her making; her product is not the shroud she weaves but the fact – and the process – of its unfinishedness. Through weaving by day and unweaving by night, Penelope alters the temporal parameters of her situation, extending the days that lie between her and a forced remarriage, expanding the time that Odysseus has to return; by contrast, through his own knitting, Elijah Tilley seeks to “hastily shorte[n] the very thread of time” – a formulation that turns time into the material that his fingers spin, and a metaphor that calls attention to the extent to which any doing is always also a form of undoing. (The most intricate or productive knitting, in other words, inevitably shortens the length of yarn that one holds in his hands.) And, indeed, Tilley's play (or battle) with time seems bound up with the fact that he “keep[s] a-lookin' off an' droppin' o' [his] stitches” (121). The looking off – the losing track, the forgetting – is, for Tilley, a crucial component in his work of commemoration and relation alike, and a crucial component of his tentative move into a future that seems likely to be “same's” the present, and “same's” the recent past. If there are sands of time here, then Jewett seems less concerned with attempts to race *against* them (as in Foote's understanding of the anxious narrator's “sense of urgency about her own project of collecting and arranging folklore and folkways”) than she is with the sensory experience *of* them – with how those sands of time might feel between the fingers that sift them, with how space and time themselves might feel to a body inhabiting them from past to present to future.

Coda

The book's principle of continuation, that is to say, is not based solely on what remains but also on what passes away – and on *how* the process of experience of that passing is shared, discussed, transmitted, and felt. To put this another way: what remains (and what is related to) is

often the feeling of loss, is the experience that a person or place or way of life has faded from the earth, is the recognition of a summer visitor having come, having stayed, and having gone. And so what the narrator perceives and records (and herself embodies) is not stasis but impermanence – is not objects held constant throughout time but rather the (changing, fleeting) experience of time itself.

Although neither environmental rhetoric nor regionalist criticism would be likely to agree with this proposition, I want to suggest – gesturally, by way of closing – that we might understand the *Pointed Firs* narrator as an ethical model (for friendship, for environmentalism, for care) precisely in and through her temporariness, precisely in and through her decision not to remain.³⁸ For there is no reason why permanence, fidelity, and longevity need be prerequisites for care – or why, for that matter, we need to understand any of these terms as being predicated on spatial proximity, physical persistence, or embodied intimacy. If our customary models of stewardship identify our investment in the environment in terms reminiscent of monogamy's

³⁸ We can recall from above the prevalent critiques of regionalism as exploitative tourism. A similar distrust of the contemporary tourist – this time, the eco-tourist – appears in Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands's essay "Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies" (in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, eds. Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson [Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana U P, 2010]), especially p.333. Indeed, the ideal environmentalist subject is typically understood to be settled and committed to a specific region. This person has chosen a place to live, and has committed to that place. He both values and metonymizes the "community" that drives such environmentally-friendly institutions as "community supported agriculture." Such that he has to participate in a capitalist economy, he does so as much as possible at farmers' markets and local retailers. Indeed, "local" his perhaps is primary buzzword. He thinks locally and acts globally. He believes, as we are supposed to, that change begins at home. (Here, we might begin to feel the paradigm of the nuclear family ever so gently creeping back in – although we might also acknowledge that this dissertation's spinsterly biographical figures were all tied to and associated with a primary geographical locale. Carson found her peace, her tidepools, and her beloved friend Dorothy Freeman on the coast of Maine. Jewett, who sailed around the world with Annie Fields, always came home to South Berwick. Dickinson dwelled within that corner room in Amherst. And, Thoreau, we all know, "traveled much in Concord.") Although some recent environmental(ist) work has suggested that an investment in rootedness may lead to closed-mindedness (or, at its most extreme, to (proto-)fascism and xenophobia), more often than not a deep investment in localness, in longevity, in *staying put* is praised within – and considered a prerequisite for – meaningful environmental investment. For an exemplification of this logic, see the emphasis on nativism and origins in Steingraber, *Raising Elijah* (particularly pp.60-61 and p.268).

dictates, then perhaps it's worth asking whether Jewett's book – with its non-dyadic relational patterns, its characters who forget as often as they remember or preserve, and its thematic and structural performance of entities “lost to sight” – can yield a model for environmental promiscuity, for an eye that wanders not from partner to partner, but from person to place, from present to past, from a companion seemingly present despite her death to a companion seemingly absent despite her physical immediacy.

Whereas the contemporary environmental movement sometimes suggests that we make things loved (and hence worth protecting) by making them known, Jewett's text suggests that investment and emotion can emerge even when – and perhaps particularly when – entities remain unknown. And so we are left with the wonderfully provocative fact that a work of regionalism – this genre typically read as being invested in preserving and presenting “local color” – would situate itself at, and choose to engage with, the limits of (interpersonal and environmental) access, a seeming paradox to those of us familiar with the push to the “local” in contemporary environmentalism. Whereas that rhetoric (buy local, eat local, etc.) is designed to engender precisely the combination of knowledge and love that I gestured toward above,³⁹ Jewett's text

³⁹ To give just one example, Wendell Berry argues (in an article originally published in *Orion* magazine) that local investment, knowledge, and neighborliness are the keys to resisting an oppressive, disenfranchising, and environmentally harmful “total economy”: “If the government does not propose to protect the lives, livelihoods, and freedoms of its people, then the people must think about protecting themselves. How are they to protect themselves? There seems, really, to be only one way, and that is to develop and put into practice the idea of a local economy – something that growing numbers of people are now doing.... They want to give everybody in the local community a direct, long-term interest in the prosperity, health, and beauty of their homeland. This is the only way presently available to make the total economy less total” (328). I do not necessarily disagree with Berry's investments, nor do I want to in any way devalue the potential efficacy of promoting local attachments as part of the environmental movement. But I do think that such attachments can, by definition, be only *part* of a successful environmentalism. What about people who are not as emplaced as Berry seems to presume we all are – who are somehow peripatetic or diasporic? What about those who are otherwise temporary, or otherwise unlikely to themselves embody “prosperity, health, ..beauty” and longevity, such as the elderly spinster or the terminally ill? And what about scenarios in which the kind of knowledge that he advocates is simply not possible for one reason or another? It seems that as deeply compelling as local rhetorics are, we need

both challenges the privileging of love as an interpersonal affect and calls into question the likelihood of our ever fully coming to know a person, a place, or another('s) way of being in the world. Her book asks that we consider what we do in the face of not-knowing, what we do when the kinds of attachments that often condition our investments in or commitments to a community are simply not available to us. Whereas our contemporary emphasis on the local prioritizes the experience of direct, face-to-face encounter, and whereas queer theorists like Love suggest that to turn away is to refuse, Jewett reroutes her definition of engagement through Elijah Tilley, whom, we might recall, “one could never look ... in the face.”

And if *Pointed Firs* counters an investment in immediacy, then it does so, too, by giving us access to all that can happen (relationally, ethically, communally) well after the fact – at Poor Joanna’s grave, in Poor Dear’s sitting room, amidst Captain Littlepage’s strange reminiscences of those creatures who, long ago and far away, were “lost to sight.” Here, we might feel the resonance of the third word in the etymological link connecting *watch* and *wait*. I am speaking here of *wake*, that polyvalent term that refers to (among other things) the track left by a ship; a state of wakefulness; a night of devout watching; the time spent watching a dead body, stewarding it from death to burial; the condition of aftermath. Such varied “wake”s are thematized throughout Jewett’s portraits of seaside life; within *Pointed Firs* itself, Captain Littlepage “move[s] his chair out of the wake of the sunshine” (18), Mrs. Todd enters the narrator’s room “with the small visitor [Mrs. Fosdick] in her wake” (58), and, in the Dunnet Landing story “A Dunnet Shepherdess,” William and the narrator “[leave] a wake of [the dried salt fish’s] pungent flavor behind [them] all the way” (141). These ambient wakes – the trails left by scent and light and bodily movement – have as their correlate the entire span of *Pointed Firs*

also to consider how to develop an ethical stance in the face of *not* knowing, *not* loving, and *not* being directly invested – whatever the reasons for those states may be.

itself, which, as I suggested above, transpires in the wake of an unarticulated past experience, of a visit that makes the narrator's summer not an initial encounter but instead a "return." By situating burgeoning relationships and muted happenings and paradigms of storytelling all within an extended wake (or, to return to Tilley for a moment, an extended Watch –), Jewett allows (and gently urges) us to acknowledge the capacities for engagement and relation that persist even when we come to a situation late. *Pointed Firs* thus alters the paradigm of what we consider to be "timely," yielding a model for spinsterly engagement that persists – like the scenes of the book itself – beyond the customary bounds of happening, beyond the customary contours of event.

CHAPTER TWO:
DAYS IN PRAISE OF DISTANCE: ELEGIAC ABSENCE IN
HENRY DAVID THOREAU'S *A WEEK ON THE CONCORD AND MERRIMACK RIVERS*

In turning now from one tale of a summer's journey to another, perhaps it makes sense to begin with a seemingly simple observation: *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Henry David Thoreau's 1849 account of an 1839 river journey, is an intractably strange book. For a text framed as a travelogue, that names its chapters after the days of the week and includes as its frontispiece a map of the rivers whose path it ostensibly plans to narrate, what is most striking about Thoreau's work is how readily (and how eagerly) it loses its course. It is more often digressive than directed; to borrow language from Ralph Waldo Emerson's review of the book, the travel narrative itself is "a very slender thread for such big beads & ingots as are strung on it."¹ Indeed, Thoreau more often strays than follows – he spends far more pages discussing classical literature, eastern philosophy, and American history than the terrain of the rivers themselves. A book whose title seems to guarantee both temporal and geographical anchors, *A Week* instead disorients, offering us a course only to set us adrift. And yet at least the object of the travelogue's attention appears, even if only to be abandoned or relinquished. For *A Week* grows stranger still when we turn to the other genre to which it is customarily said to belong: elegy. Insistently unnamed in the book is Thoreau's companion on the river, this person whose presence constitutes the ubiquitous "we" of the narrative voice, and who is identified only relationally – as one half of an interchangeable and insistently symmetrical set of terms ("the one" and "the other," "the voyageur" and "his companion," that indivisible first person plural pronoun) – throughout the text. We know that this unnamed companion is Thoreau's brother

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, letter to Evert Augustus Duyckinck, March 12, 1847, *The Selected Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Myerson (New York: Columbia U P, 1997), 317. The letter was penned two years before the eventual publication of *A Week*; Emerson was writing to Duyckinck in hopes of finding a publisher for Thoreau.

John, whose sudden death from lockjaw in 1842 inspired the writing of the book, but whom Thoreau left entirely unnamed and nearly entirely unacknowledged throughout the pages of *A Week*.² And we know, too, that these same pages are typically read as an elegy penned in the wake of this unacknowledged loss. The strangeness of Thoreau's travelogue, which repeatedly loses its ostensible object, pales in comparison to the strangeness of his elegy, which seems barely to bring its subject in at all.

In other words, *A Week* is as notable – and as notorious – for what it doesn't do as for what it does, a fact that has posed challenges for even the most astute and sensitive critics. For how does one attend in a nuanced way to what a book doesn't include, to the absences and elisions by which it has come to be defined? Many of Thoreau's contemporaries responded to *Week*'s oddities by impugning the book's – and its author's – apparent lack of skill.³ Emerson's comment about the beads and ingots ranked among the most generous and most neutral of *A Week*'s reviews; more typical was James Russell Lowell's critique in an 1849 issue of the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*:

We come upon [the book's digressions] like snags, jolting us headforemost out of our places as we are rowing placidly up stream or drifting down. Mr. Thoreau becomes so absorbed in these discussions, that he seems, as it were, to *catch a crab*, and disappears uncomfortably from his seat at the bow-oar. We could forgive them all...we could welcome them all, were they put by themselves at the end of the book. But as it is, they are out of proportion and out of place, and mar our Merrimacking dreadfully. We were bid to a river-party, not to be preached at.⁴

² According to Linck C. Johnson, Thoreau decided to write a book-length account of *A Week* only after John's untimely death. For more on the compositional history of the book, see Johnson's *Thoreau's Complex Weave: The Writing of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (Charlottesville U P of Virginia, 1986).

³ These negative reviews begin to indicate *A Week*'s lack of critical success and commercial appeal. Indeed, something else that the book didn't do is sell; 706 of the first 1000 print copies were left unpurchased, and found their way back to the shelves of Henry David Thoreau. As he quipped in an October 28, 1853 journal entry, "I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself" (cited in Peck, Introduction, ix).

⁴

Taking the river journey as the central topic of the book and the aim of the narrative, Lowell essentially accuses Thoreau of false advertising. *A Week*'s many interruptions become "dread[ful]" distractions; they jolt and snag and mar; they are, finally, unforgiveable.⁵ When disrupted by history and philosophy and meditations on loss, travelogue fails. The problem is not the content of those meditations, but rather their placement and their form; deflection, we are to understand, constitutes the book's ultimate sin.⁶

A similar bias creeps up in our contemporary critical moment, particularly among readers who have turned the nineteenth-century critics' presumption on its head, treating elegy as Thoreau's primary aim, and understanding the travelogue simply as the frame that supports a meditation on loss. These readers, strikingly, are no less generous about Thoreau's form than was Lowell; in *Young Man Thoreau*, for instance, Richard Lebeaux casts the indirections that propel the narrative as a characteristic pattern of avoidance:

[T]he writing of the book, which demanded that Henry picture himself alongside his brother, was an excruciating task. It was not so much that Henry had to "get away from it all" to write the *Week*, but that he needed to gather his courage to face the project. Although there are significant hidden references to John (and Ellen) in the finished work (such as the account of the dream concerning a "difference with a Friend"), John is not directly discussed; it is as if Henry could not bear fully to confront the memories and feelings associated with his brother.... In order to protect himself from being overwhelmed by his grief and guilt, Thoreau could write only obliquely about his brother's death and the issues associated with it.⁷

⁵ Worth noting, too, is the fact that as the river disappears from sight, so too (for Lowell at least) does Thoreau; I would agree that there is something "uncomfortabl[e]" about the way that Thoreau recedes, but not because I need him to be my guide to the Concord and Merrimack, and not because I expect him to retain "his seat at the bow-oar." I will leave this as an oblique possibility for now; the matter will return.

⁶ A similar assessment appears in Walter Harding's introduction to the 1963 edition of *A Week*. As J.J. Boies summarizes: "Even such a Thoreau scholar as Walter Harding notes only the structural device of the 'week,' into which, of course, many experiences were condensed. Harding calls the interpolated essays 'digressions,' that frequently have 'little or no connection with the excursion at all,' and seems to feel that he must apologize for the fact that *A Week* 'is not the tightly unified book that some of his [Thoreau's] later writings are'" ("Circular Imagery in Thoreau's *Week*" [*College English* 26.5 (February, 1965)], 350).

⁷ *Young Man Thoreau* CITE 198-199

Not surprisingly, given the psychoanalytic (and diagnostic) tenor of his discussion, Lebeaux understands the text's absences as elisions indexing the intense emotions that a stronger personality would have the fortitude to engage directly. The book's obliqueness thus itself becomes a kind of falling off, standing in stark opposition to the acts of "fac[ing]" and "fully...confront[ing]" that a more "courage[ous]" Thoreau might have undertaken.⁸ Within the haze of distance and absence and indirection, a skilled psychoanalytic reader like Lebeaux is able to catch the wisps of "significant hidden reference" to those topics that Thoreau does not dare directly address; indirectness, then, becomes simply an interpretive obstacle – or a potentially misleading blankness – to be overcome. Despite the centuries and the differences in critical approach that separate Lowell and Lebeaux, both readers understand deflection as a way of distracting from the central topic at hand – whether that topic is, as in one man's mind, a naturalist's travelogue, or, as in the other's, a mourner's attempt to make sense of his most painful loss. These reviewers not only treat deflection and obliqueness and absence as writerly failure, but also treat the travelogue and the elegy at best as competing paradigms, and at worst as mutually exclusive genres.

And writing was not the only realm of Thoreau's existence in which failure loomed large.⁹ His life, critics argued, veered as far off course as his travelogue; where other men of his generation concerned themselves with career and family and carrying on their name, Thoreau

⁸ A kind of hybrid of Harding's and Lebeaux's critiques appears in the work of Perry Miller. As Linck C. Johnson summarizes, "According to...Miller, Thoreau failed to confront the problem of death directly. Describing some of the surviving manuscripts of the digression on graveyards, which Miller believes indicate 'the agonized effort that lies behind the pages,' in 'Monday,' he concludes, 'The subject became too much for [Thoreau], he could not master it' (CC 68)" (62).

⁹ One possible route of reading Thoreau queerly, thus, would be to juxtapose Scott Sandage's portrait of him in the opening pages of *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge & London: Harvard U P, 2006) with Judith Halberstam's most recent book, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham & London: Duke U P, 2011), which – in keeping with her earlier work that understood "queer" as a way of life fundamentally unconcerned with longevity and fundamentally opposed to (normative) development – understands failure as a playful, queer way of resisting societal norms.

seemed perplexingly content to (or with) drift. (I said above that *A Week* is as famous for what it doesn't do as for what it does; the same holds true of its author as well.) Where Rachel Carson's spinsterliness was used to challenge her scientific credentials and the legitimacy of her academic investments, Thoreau's was used to critique both the tenor of his prose and the purposiveness of his life. Early skeptics of Thoreau's project often invoked his bachelorhood to exemplify the misanthropic stance that they believed characterized his writing and demeanor alike; his failure to start a family was understood as a refusal of warmth, of relation, and even of life. An anonymous review of *Walden* in the October 1854 issue of the *Boston Atlas*, for instance, reached a feverish pitch when the reviewer turned from the "fact" of Thoreau's hermeticism to its affective tenor:

Pithy sarcasm, stern judgment, cold condemnation – all these abound in the pages of this volume. The follies and emptiness of men are uncovered with a sweeping hand. There is truth in it; strong, vigorous, nervous truth. But there is not a page, a paragraph giving one sign of liberality, charitableness, kind feeling, generosity, in a word – HEART. The noble deeds, the silent fortitude, the hidden sorrow of mankind, are nowhere recognized. It is difficult to understand that a mother had ever clasped this hermit to her bosom; that a sister had ever imprinted on his lips a tender kiss. The occasional ridiculousness of some of his propositions is only exceeded by the total absence of human affection which they evince. It is scarcely to be credited that any man could have lived thirty years in New England and written a volume treating expressly of human life, which exhibits such an utter dearth of all the kindly, generous feelings of our nature. Could not the instinctive loves of birds and beasts have awakened within him one thought of the purer, loftier, nobler passion accorded to his own race? Did he never people that bare hovel, in imagination, with a loving and beloved wife and blooming children, or did he imagine that to know what life is he must ignore its origin?¹⁰

The critique is awash with language of sterility and barrenness; lacking any trace of a woman's touch in his past and any desire for the same in his present, Thoreau is left with a life – and an affective capacity – as bare as the walls of his Walden cabin. In much the same way that a spinster's presumed asexuality is made timeless and ahistorical through the appellation "Old

¹⁰ Cited in Joel Myerson, ed., *Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1992), 399. Hereafter cited in the text.

Maid,” Thoreau’s ascetic solitude is here made to seem perpetual: not only do the words of his book make the reviewer doubt that he has ever “[peopled] that bare hovel, in imagination, with a loving and beloved wife and blooming children,” but they also make it difficult to believe that “a mother had ever clasped this hermit to her bosom; that a sister had ever imprinted on his lips a tender kiss.” Thoreau’s modes of relation, in other words, not only make him unfit to be a husband or a father, but they also retroactively excommunicate him as a sibling and a son. The “origin” that he must ignore in order to “know what life is” ultimately seems to refer not only to the non-existent births of his never-imagined children but also to his own youth. The “HEART” that *Walden* is missing is in part that of the boy Thoreau once was. (His personal failings, in other words, are not only relational and affective but temporal as well.)

This point is worth mentioning not solely for its own sake but rather because such a critique – that Thoreau is too little a boy – inverts the terms typically applied to bachelorhood and queerness more generally: that the bachelor in question is too much a boy, that his development is stunted or suspended, that his maturation is hopelessly incomplete. In *America’s Bachelor Uncle: Thoreau and the American Polity*, Bob Pepperman Taylor catalogs scholars’ dismissals of Thoreau’s politics, cataloging their myriad reasons for overlooking the prolific writings of one of nineteenth-century America’s great thinkers. Within this survey comes a series of remarks about Thoreau’s immaturity:

[Another] complaint... is that Thoreau’s writings are so youthful as to be immature. It is certainly true that Thoreau exhibits a young person’s (and to some, annoying) rebelliousness. Emerson notes of Thoreau in his *Journal*, “He is a boy, & will be an old boy,” and Henry James Sr. declares that Thoreau “was literally the most childlike, unconscious and unblushing egotist it has ever been my fortune to encounter in the ranks of manhood.” In our own time, Joyce Carol Oates writes that “Thoreau’s appeal is to that instinct in us – adolescent, perhaps, but not merely adolescent – that resists our own gravitation toward the outer, larger, fiercely competitive world of responsibility, false courage, and ‘reputation.’” For some critics this young quality casts a serious doubt upon Thoreau’s competence as a social and political commentator. Robert Louis Stevenson

disapprovingly observes that “something essentially youthful distinguishes all Thoreau’s knock-down blows at current opinion.” George Hochfield is appalled by what he believes is the “relentless adolescent moralizing” of *Walden*, and Heinz Eulau complains about Thoreau’s “political immaturity.” As with claims about Thoreau’s mental stability, the implication of these comments is that Thoreau never achieved an intellectual adulthood, and we therefore need not take the intellectual content of his work terribly seriously.¹¹

While these critics’ remarks center predominantly on Thoreau’s intellectual immaturity, Pepperman’s concluding comment that “Thoreau never achieved an intellectual adulthood” (along with the frequency with which the other critics’ comments contrast his youthfulness or childishness to normative maturation) evokes a lexicon of failed development applicable far beyond the intellectual or political-theoretical realm. Even a far more sympathetic reader of Thoreau – his friend, interlocutor, and Concord neighbor Ralph Waldo Emerson – read his bachelorhood in a manner that combined the asceticism seen by the *Atlas* reviewer with the emotional immaturity or incompleteness invoked by the thinkers whose words Pepperman catalogs:

He was a protestant *a l’outrance*, and few lives contain so many renunciations. He was bred to no profession; he never married; he lived alone; he never went to church; he never voted; he refused to pay a tax to the State; he ate no flesh, he drank no wine, and he never knew the use of tobacco; and, though a naturalist, he used neither trap nor gun. He chose, wisely, no doubt, for himself, to be the bachelor of thought and Nature.¹²

In Emerson’s lexicon, bachelorhood is an identity laden with the weight of its renunciations; the affirmative statement with which the paragraph closes (“He chose...to be the bachelor of thought and Nature”) gathers the force of the 11 negations that precede it, as bachelorhood becomes the receptacle for the “no”s and “never”s and “neither”s of an insistently abstinent life. Even the

¹¹ Bob Pepperman Taylor, *America’s Bachelor Uncle: Thoreau and the American Polity* (Lawrence: U P of Kansas, 1996), 3. Hereafter cited in the text.

¹² Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Thoreau,” in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), 380. Hereafter cited in the text.

final “[choice]” is one that Thoreau makes only “for himself”; in some ways, it seems no less a “[refusal]” than the act of civil disobedience that landed Thoreau in jail.

Indeed, bachelorhood itself is often understood to be a kind of civil disobedience, a rejection of the paradigms of family life and reproduction that contribute to the furthering of civic society. Not surprisingly, then, this rhetoric of renunciation evolves, over the course of the essay, into a rhetoric of non-production:

Had this genius been only contemplative, he had been fitted to his life, but with his energy and practical ability he seemed born for great enterprise and for command; and I so much regret the loss of his rare powers of action, that I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry-party. Pounding beans is good to the end of pounding empires one of these days; but if, at the end of years, it is still only beans!” (393)

Like Oates’s claim (as cited by Pepperman) that Thoreau “resists our own gravitation toward the outer, larger, fiercely competitive world of responsibility,” Emerson’s remarks ascribe to Thoreau’s life a fundamental selfishness and insularity, as the political inconsequence and insistently local scale of the “huckleberry-party” is contrasted to the unequivocal agency and broad efficacy of “engineering for all America.” Likewise, the cyclical, seasonal temporality of “pounding beans” – a task necessarily begun again every year, a task whose completion is only ever temporary – is implicitly contrasted to the linear, aspirational trajectory of the man who could combine his “rare powers of action” with the requisite “ambition.” *At the end of years*, in other words, Thoreau’s product – unlike a child, unlike a potential reached – “is still only beans!” (We might note at this point that while critiques of Thoreau’s deflected travelogue suggest that he attends too little to the future [or to a future-oriented stance] and critiques of his

deflected elegy suggest that he attends too little to the past, critiques of his deflected development replicate both complaints.¹³)

In this chapter, I aim to develop a different account of both *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and its author: one that begins by treating deflection itself as the book's central formal, philosophical, and relational principle. If we take deflection as a deliberate technique rather than as a form of avoidance or distraction, we can begin to make sense of many of the text's peculiarities (the frequency with which its directed travel narrative yields to intensely digressive meditations, the insistent anonymity and exceedingly faint presence of its elegiac subject, the impenetrable steadiness of its tone). For deflection itself, as we will see, yields intervals - spatial, temporal, and epistemological – that both make absence felt as such and become the ground for affective investment, historiographical practice, and environmental care.

In treating absence as an affirmative, and even a companionable, entity, Thoreau develops an alternate elegiac practice: one that treats death as the ground of relation, rather than as a barrier to or the horizon of it. And so too does he develop an alternate mode of travelogue; one that, rather than progressing directly from origin to destination, instead suspends its reader in the distances between them. In both cases, the writing gains its momentum and meaning not by tracking or clinging to objects, but rather by relinquishing the very need for them; this

¹³ If the critics of Thoreau's bachelorhood cast his unmarried state as a brand of asceticism, self-deprivation, and non-productivity opposed to both the warmth of family life and the completion of normal masculine development, recent queer readings of Thoreau have retained this binary structure, albeit to different ends. Some contemporary queer readings (particularly those by Warner and Coviello) have attempted to counter Thoreau's presumed abstinence and his developmental immaturity – the accumulated weight of those many renunciations – by emphasizing his rich affective life: his desires, his friendships, his loneliness, his disappointment(s). The theoretical binary is correct, these readings suggest, but Thoreau's place within it has been misunderstood. Other queer theorists, by contrast, have chosen instead to cast Thoreau as the ascetic *par excellence*, as a man whose refusals are to be celebrated for their radicality. These readings retain both the binary and Thoreau's customary place within it; altered, however, is the affective valence of rejection, abstinence, and non-participation themselves. (See especially Henry Abelow, "From Thoreau to Queer Politics," *Deep Gossip* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005)).

pervasive tendency makes the book an example of what we might deem the temporal intransitive. Always reaching back in its meditations toward figures who cannot be reached directly and ahead in its minimal narrative scaffolding toward a goal notable only for its capacity to be suspended, the people and places actually encountered in the course of Thoreau's journey become not objects of direct attention but rather the ground or medium for deflection itself. In the process, the environment (or environmentality) becomes neither the background upon which action takes place nor the foregrounded object of attention but instead the mode through which absence, temporal suspension, and distanced relation can be felt as such.

By writing in this hybrid genre, the elegy-travelogue, Thoreau presents an alternate model of the environmental present, one as defined by forms of mediation as are the book's paradigms of futurity and of retrospect alike. Rather than treating the present as a space of plenitude, immediacy, or presence in the face of the losses of the past and the inaccessibility of the future (rather, that is, than treating it as a recuperative realm), Thoreau makes it a space in which absence itself can be felt, and in which relational intervals can be produced, experienced, and maintained. In casting interactions with the present as being as indirect and insistently mediated as his interactions with the past and future, Thoreau changes how we understand both investment and agency (or the role of the individual subject) in the face of change. As he suspends our customary sense of movement, Thoreau also importantly suspends our normal definitions of agency and liveness; in his account, drift becomes not a state of passivity or avoidance but rather a mode both of moving forward and of looking back.¹⁴

¹⁴ "Drift" here is a description not only of the movement of Thoreau's boat but also of the contours of his life. For his failure to follow normative developmental paradigms (courtship, marriage, children, family, property ownership, etc.) is most commonly understood by readers of his life and work as a kind of biographical or experiential drift. David M. Robinson: "Left *adrift* after his school closed in 1841, Thoreau accepted Emerson's invitation to live at his house as a kind of apprentice scholar, general

Distance and Deflection

If *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* had a subtitle, I'd like to imagine that it might include the notion of distance. The term itself is sufficiently slippery to satisfy Thoreau, it seems, evoking miles traversed (distances *covered*) for the reader in search of the literal, evoking something slightly different and less definable (distances *experienced, resented, praised, overcome, built*) for the reader looking to slide through figures like an author enamored with the intricacies of words and history and place and the realms between. Yes, Thoreau is a thinker concerned with connection and excavation and experience. Yes, this book can be read as a mode of gathering histories, of accessing the past, of juxtaposing the (perhaps equally illusory) timeless and temporal. And yet Thoreau often seems as invested in forms of inaccessibility as he is in forms of approach, seems to feel as great an attraction to modes of remaining distant as he does to modes of coming to know. Ultimately, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* presents encounters with, within, and across distances – the distances of historical event, the distances of a landscape's past, the distances of narrative, the distances of interpersonal relation, the distances of geography, and, most fundamentally, the distances of death. These distances, importantly, are not barriers to encounter but forms of encounter themselves, and the book as a whole becomes a catalog of all the ways there are to live one's way through distance as such, to cover the ground (or the current) that distance itself is. By making distance both the mode of and

handyman, and close family friend: (32). "Having lost his school, Thoreau was *adrift* vocationally; he was an aspirant to authorship with no solid accomplishments, utterly dependent on Emerson's support; and he had lost, in John, the closest human relationship that he would ever have" (33). And Lebeaux: "Cut *adrift* from the book [*Walden*], he was washed up more emphatically on the shores of time" (Seasons 214). "When [in his life] he was not able to achieve satisfactory alignment, when discordant notes had been struck, he was most vulnerable to a sense of *drift*, stagnation, dejection, and despair" (Seasons 334-335). These are simply emblematic examples; the list could go on.

prerequisite for any experience, Thoreau creates a paradigm in which death can become neither a radically discrete event nor the horizon of event(fulness) but instead one form of remove standing beside the myriad others which populate the text. And by linking death to the deflections of direct experience which govern the narrative's rhythm – which, almost literally, make it tick – I seek in turn to suggest an alternative way of understanding the elegiac quality of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, one which makes death more akin to the distances that facilitate and constitute relation than to the distances that preclude it. Through this approach to elegy, *A Week* yields a model of environmental temporality that manages to incorporate death, rather than shun or fear it; in so doing, the book also forces us to consider the role that the dead play in paradigms of emotional relationality.

From the outset of *A Week*, Thoreau calls attention to deflections of direct experience, insistently suggesting the forms of mediation so often foundational to our encounters with place. In the “Concord River” preface to his narrative, even as Thoreau encourages his readers to undertake the trip up the currents in body as well as in mind, his evocation of that imagined journey places the traveler in a state of remove relative to the sights along the way:

You shall see men you never heard of before, whose names you don't know, going away down through the meadow with long ducking-guns, with water-tight boots wading through the fowl-meadow grass, on bleak, wintry, distant shores, with guns at half-cock, and they shall see teal, blue-winged, green-winged, shelldrakes, whistlers, black ducks, ospreys, and many other wild and noble sights before night, such as they who sit in parlors never dream of.¹⁵

In a passage where incarnations of distance mount along with the rhythm of the prose itself¹⁶ – where unknown men become unknown anonymous men become unknown anonymous men,

¹⁵ Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, ed. H. Daniel Peck (New York: Penguin Classics, 1998), 9. Hereafter cited in the text.

¹⁶ As is often true in *A Week*, the pattern of deflection appears in the cadence of triple meter – here, the dactyls of “you will see...they will see.” Furthermore, there is a kind of hypnotic regularity to the way in

backs turned, walking away from the scene – the ultimate objects of the gaze are accessible only at a remove, through the voyager’s act of watching those who will spot these “wild and noble” sights firsthand. The distances are experiential, temporal, and spatial alike, compounding one another and combining to form a kind of encounter predicated on layers of remove. In some ways, it seems, this passage demands that we expand our definition of experience, allowing for the possibility that remote entities can be reread as indirectly accessible. And yet, like seemingly all claims made about *A Week*, this one can easily turn in on itself, look the other way. Because as everything about this passage recedes from sight, and as the birds are present only as imagined bodies or reported speech or linguistic construction, Thoreau seems determined to call attention to deflection, contingency, and the limits of perception – to make us aware of just how much there is that, for one reason or another, we may never see. Such a re-vision changes not just how we understand distance but also how we might understand proximity; ultimately, it seems, we are being asked to consider the possibility of understanding the immediate as indirectly remote. Whereas customary definitions of relation (and, not coincidentally, of affect) are predicated on questions of access and nearness, here relation (or our capacity for it) is measured in units of distance, in levels of remove. Rather than casting remoteness as a challenge to be overcome, Thoreau makes of it a reality to be articulated and inhabited and understood.

Deflection, then, is not a way of transcending or surmounting distance and absence, but rather of producing and measuring them. In describing his boat’s Monday approach to Salmon Brook on the journey upstream, for instance, Thoreau explains the topographical and historical distances or limits which constitute his experience. In so doing, he gives us access to distance itself – and to his (and our) own terms of access:

which the list of birds unfolds into a line of trochaic hexameter: “blue-winged, green-winged, shelldrakes, whistlers, black ducks, ospreys....”

Salmon Brook comes in from the west under the railroad, a mile and a half below the village of Nashua. We rowed up far enough into the meadows which border it to learn its piscatorial history from a haymaker on its banks. He told us that the silver eel was formerly abundant here, and pointed to some sunken creels at its mouth. This man's memory and imagination were fertile in fishermen's tales of floating isles in bottomless ponds, and of lakes mysteriously stocked with fishes, and would have kept us till nightfall to listen, but we could not afford to loiter in this roadstead, and so stood out to our sea again. Though we never trod in those meadows, but only touched their margin with our hands, we still retain a pleasant memory of them.

...About one mile up this stream stood the house of old John Lovewell, who was an ensign in the army of Oliver Cromwell, and the father of 'famous Captain Lovewell.' ...I have stood in the dent of his cellar on the bank of the brook, and talked there with one whose grandfather had, whose father might have, talked with Lovewell. (128)

This is a relation practiced alongside borders, at margins, and within distances. Just as the "you will see...they will see" formulation above places us at a remove from the birds as objects of attention (so that the object of our attention becomes the deflection of attention itself), here Salmon Brook is accessed only at its borders and only through Thoreau's memories of others' (narrativized) memories. This encounter is predicated on establishing – and maintaining – a fragile sufficiency: the traveler and his companion "rowed up far enough into the meadows" to learn the region's history. In a twist on the "sufficient distance" upon which interpersonal relations in *Walden* are predicated, here we have something like a "sufficient proximity." But what, precisely, is Thoreau proximate *to*? The spatial particularity of the scene, achieved through Thoreau's characteristic use of prepositions ("in" and "from" and "under" and "below" and "up" and "into" and "on"), swiftly gives way to a temporal indeterminacy, to a past presence that cannot readily be located in time, that is known primarily by its status as "former," that lingers as relics and in "memory and imagination."

The voyager's relationship to Salmon Brook is practiced at margins and edges; he touches the "meadows which border it," but doesn't float upon it. He learns of "formerly abundant" eel and sees "sunken creels"; information collected in one "man's memory" is passed

into his own: though he and his nameless companion “never trod in those meadows... [they] still retain a pleasant memory of them.” What is elided here is immediacy, both temporal and experiential; the entire passage bears an intertwined sense of indirectness and belatedness. What he is close “enough” to is not the past or its denizens itself, and not a narrative that would grant a clear sense of meaning or wholeness to the banks. Instead, he gains access to the terms of his own access – and to the fundamental limits thereof. What he gains access to is the present interval between himself and the past: to a hollow that facilitates relation, memory, and history alike. Indeed, as he and his companion continue upstream, they “stand in the dent of [a] cellar on the bank of the brook,” a recess formed as much by time as it is by geology. These forms of deflection – temporal, narrative, spatial, and experiential alike – do not compromise Thoreau’s sense that he has engaged with Salmon Brook (“we still retain a pleasant memory of” these realms, he insists), but does compromise the sense we might otherwise have that the most salient modifying adjective for “experience” is some form of “direct.” Not surprisingly, this (indirect) praise of indirect encounter is followed up by yet another encounter at edges (“I have stood in the dent of his cellar on the bank of the brook”) and yet another instantiation of deflection, when Thoreau engages with John Lovewell (most famous dweller down that brook known only at its margins) by talking with a man whose grandfather had, whose father might have, talked with Lovewell.

The aim, ultimately, is not to be *in* the past (with Lovewell, with the not-yet-sunken creel) but *with* or *beside* it;¹⁷ Thoreau seeks to understand how he (or we, or the local denizens) got “here” – and to understand where “here” is in a relational sense, to alter the dimensionality of the present by understanding its shifting interconnections with the past. Interpersonal and

¹⁷ This discussion will return to the question of besideness when I consider the centrality of the sibling relationship to Thoreau’s narrative and understanding of loss alike.

historical relation for him become modes of besideness, their forms of intergenerational (and temporally tangential) connection resembling the sixty, century-old women whom Thoreau suggests can stand side by side and connect his mother to Eve, radically embodying – and spatializing – the temporal expanse of biblical history: “And yet the lives of but sixty old women, such as live under the hill, say of a century each, strung together, are sufficient to reach over the whole ground. Taking hold of hands they would span the interval from Eve to my own mother. A respectable tea-party merely, - whose gossip would be Universal History” (262).

Whereas the paper-doll-chain approach to history may seem to be invested in connection – in holding hands so as to span the interval from Eve to the present – Thoreau is clearly as (if not more) interested in the nature and dimensionality of that interval itself. Encounter, that is to say, need not be only about the “whose grandfather had” and the “whose father might have” but about the pauses between the words and the generations between the men; it is not only about the beads on a string but about the mode or medium of stringing together itself.¹⁸ In the process of meditating on how familiar sights can appear new and invigorating when viewed from unfamiliar perspectives, Thoreau explains:

The most distant mountains in the horizon appear to rise directly from the shore of that lake in the woods by which we chance to be standing, while from the mountain-top, not only this, but a thousand nearer and larger lakes, are equally unobserved. Seen through this clear atmosphere, the works of the farmer, his ploughing and his reaping, had a beauty to our eyes which he never saw. How fortunate we were who did not own an acre of those shores, who had not renounced our title to the whole. One who knew how to appropriate the true value of the world would be the poorest one in it. The poor rich man! All he has is what he bought. What I see is mine. I am a large owner in the Merrimack intervals. (282)

Whereas the heart of this passage – the piece easily culled and readily memorized – is a praise of holism, of a kind of experiential purchase not available to those invested in private property,

¹⁸ I choose this metaphor as an homage, once again, to the comment of Emerson’s with which we began.

Thoreau softens the triumphant “What I see is mine” with paradigms that suggest the myriad complications of seeing – and that gesture toward just how many ways there are (not) to see.¹⁹ The meditations that precede the claim are full of the vagaries of perspective; while the man on the shore sees the mountains (albeit in a slightly distorted way), the man on the mountains cannot see the shore. While the distant observer sees upon the farmer’s labor a kind of aesthetic glow, the farmer rarely gets so abstracted from his work to see the same. What we see is ours, yet we also must be aware, Thoreau seems to say, that we might not always have access to what there is to see, that literal (or figural) vision has limits of its own. If what we see is ours, then is what we don’t see not? Or is it possible to have a different kind of purchase, to be a different kind of stakeholder in the irrevocably remote?

And if we overcome these vagaries of sight? When we claim possession of all that our eyes take in? We are left with intervals: the interval, the river valley, the country between the mountain peaks, yes – but also, it seems, the interval (temporal, spatial, epistemological) defined a bit more broadly. What we are to own is the space between.²⁰ All we can access are our own

¹⁹ This meditation on stance and sight seems tied to Thoreau’s persistent interest in the epistemological relationship between the observer and the observed, a topic with particular relevance to the writings on place which have come to be read as the centerpiece of his environmental work. In the introduction to *Thoreau’s Sense of Place: Essays in American Environmental Writing*, Richard J. Schneider explains that although Thoreau was critical of “the habit of looking at things microscopically” (J III: 336-37), “as [he] himself also realized, the more distant and idealized view could also be flawed. By focusing his sight on a distant mountain, he finds that he cannot see the ‘farmhouses, the lonely mills, wooded vales, wild rocky pastures....All these, and how much more, I overlook. I see the very peak, - there can be no mistake, - but how much I do not see, that is between me and it!’ (J IV: 366, Thoreau’s emphasis). How to see what is ‘between me and it,’ how to understand and image his relation with nature, that is the essence of Thoreau’s dilemma... He was searching for a way to bridge the epistemological gap between the observer and the observed, between the perceiver and the place” (2).

²⁰ *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* is not the only place where Thoreau contemplates the appeal of being an owner of intervals. In the “Economy” chapter of *Walden*, speaking of the Hollowell Farm, which he bought and then returned to its owner, he says: “The real attractions of the Hollowell Farm, to me, were; its complete retirement, being about two miles from the village, half a mile from the nearest neighbor, and separated from the highway by a broad field; its bounding on the river, which the owner said protected it by its logs from frosts in the spring, though that was nothing to me; the gray color

modes of access, our own forms of distance and relation alike. As Thoreau says in the Journal, “With regard to...objects, I find that it is not they themselves (with which the men of science deal) that concern me; the point of interest is somewhere *between* me and them (i.e. the objects).” “The thing that really concerns me...is not there, but in my relation to that.”²¹

This model, importantly, inheres not only in the realm of environmental perception but also with regard to historiographical practice. *A Week* is, as many critics have pointed out, and as the scene involving Lovewell began to suggest, preoccupied with the past – with memory and its vagaries, with the unseen stories of the landscapes that we traverse, with death and loss and the ravages of time. However, Thoreau’s interest is not in identifying or recovering this past (putting the past in print so as to preserve, recuperating stories so as to prove that lives, like days, need not simply fade away) but instead in determining how best to read it, which means how best to acknowledge and navigate our distance from it. The distances between us and the pasts we seek are, for him, a terrain as fruitful and as complicated as the currents of the Concord and Merrimack. In an extended Monday reverie, he argues:

We should read history as little critically as we consider the landscape, and be more interested by the atmospheric tints and various lights and shades which the intervening spaces create, than by its groundwork and composition. It is the morning now turned evening and seen in the west, - the same sun, but a new light and atmosphere. Its beauty is like the sunset; not a fresco painting on a wall, flat and bounded, but atmospheric and roving or free. In reality, history fluctuates as the face of the landscape from morning to evening. What is of the moment is its hue and color. Time hides no treasures; we want not its *then*, but its *now*. We do not complain that the mountains in the horizon are blue and indistinct; they are more like the heavens.

and ruinous state of the house and barn, and the dilapidated fences, which put such an *interval* between me and the last occupant; the hollow and lichen-covered apple trees, gnawed by rabbits, showing what kind of neighbors I should have; but above all, the recollection I had of it from my earliest voyages up the river, when the house was concealed behind a dense grove of red maples, behind which I heard the house-dog bark” (60).

²¹ Journal cited in Richard J. Schneider, Introduction to *Thoreau’s Sense of Place: Essays in American Environmental Writing*, ed. Schneider (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2000), 2.

Of what moment are facts that can be lost, - which need to be commemorated? The monument of death will outlast the memory of the dead. The pyramids do not tell the tale which was confided to them; the living fact commemorates itself. Why look in the dark for light? Strictly speaking, the historical societies have not recovered one fact from oblivion, but are themselves, instead of the fact, that is lost. The researcher is more memorable than the researched. The crowd stood admiring the mist and the dim outlines of the trees seen through it, when one of their number advanced to explore the phenomenon, and with fresh admiration all eyes were turned on his dimly retreating figure. It is astonishing with how little co-operation of the societies the past is remembered. Its story has indeed had another muse than has been assigned it. There is a good instance of the manner in which all history began, in Alwakidis' Arabian Chronicle: 'I was informed by *Ahmed Almatin Aljorhami*, who had it from *Rephaa Ebn Kais Alamiri*, who had it from *Saiph Ebn Fabalah Alchatquarmi*, who had it from *Thabet Ebn Alkamah*, who said he was present at the action.' These fathers of history were not anxious to preserve, but to learn the fact; and hence it was not forgotten. Critical acumen is exerted in vain to uncover the past; the *past* cannot be *presented*; we cannot know what we are not. But one veil hangs over the past, present, and future, and it is the province of the historian to find out, not what was, but what is. Where a battle has been fought, you will find nothing but the bones of men and beasts; where a battle is being fought, there are hearts beating. We will sit on a mound and muse, and not try to make these skeletons stand on their legs again. Does nature remember, think you, that they *were* men, or not rather that they *are* bones? (123-124)

The heart of the passage is, once again, a paradigm of deflection: who had it from, who had it from, who had it from, who said he was present. And yet this passage does more than its predecessors to make explicit the extent to which the successive stages of this narrative trajectory do not supplant or replace one another but instead constitute a kind of cumulative atmospheric thickness. Indeed, Thoreau suggests, we should relate to and evaluate our histories like we do our landscapes – through their atmosphere, their hues, their experiential dimensionality, the forces which intervene between us and them. If we are to “own” histories, in other words, we must do so not by reaching or seizing the past, but by reckoning with inaccessibility – with the interval – itself. As a result, the passage gestures toward a new kind of “environmental history” – not one which necessarily takes account of the natural environment (although it certainly could), but one which takes a kind of environmental accounting, understanding history as atmospheric or ambient in its very nature. And reading history as atmospheric, it seems, is one way to prioritize

the historian's (or voyager's) positioning in the present without succumbing to or advocating a simple presentist stance.

The contribution of this passage is to suggest that history engage not with what no longer exists but instead precisely with what does – with the persistence of pastness itself. Ruins, bones, atmospheres: these constitute our present-day forms of relation. Just as in our aesthetic appreciation of a landscape, we prioritize the tints and light and shade which intervene between us and the object of our gaze (and which perhaps deserve more attention than do the shape or composition of the landscape as a whole), so in our approach to history we ought to embrace the fluctuation and dynamism of “what is of the moment,” emphasizing the shapes we create through our stance relative to history rather than attempting to conjure what the past autonomously was or is or might be. The past, it seems, cannot be presented, but pastness – the force which persists and burgeons, which confronts us in the present and meets our gaze – always and necessarily is. There is no access to the past except in and through the pastness that we encounter today. There are no trees separate from the fog of relation and distance (and distant relation) which surround them.²²

Thoreauvian Elegy; or, Death as Relation

²² Like Rebecca Solnit, who aligns her discussion (and performance) of historiographical practices with the experience of being suspended within mists and fogs (see particularly the discussion of early photography and historiographical practice in *Yosemite in Time: Ice Ages, Tree Clocks, Ghost Rivers* [San Antonio: Trinity U P, 2005]), Thoreau here engages with the visual atmospheres of historical relation, with the hues and tints and shades and mist and dim outlines and dimly retreating figures that constitute our relation to the past. In *Thoreau's Morning Work*, H. Daniel Peck acknowledges the centrality of these forms of fog or obscurity to Thoreau's emphasis on relationality, arguing that “[i]f a shifting perspective is one of *A Week's* most important visual strategies, another of equal importance is obscurity, or ‘indistinctness.’ Following Emerson's example, Thoreau often maneuvers himself in position to blur the hard outlines of the world in order to reveal the larger rays of relation. As he puts it in ‘Friday,’ ‘Sometimes we see objects as through a thin haze....’” (25). A bit later in his argument, he directly links this emphasis on fog and haze (which he has cataloged in the intervening pages) directly to the medial dimensions which intervene between Thoreau and the past: “‘Tuesday’s pervasive environment of mist, cloud, and fog is the visual equivalent for the haze of memory through which the past is viewed” (30).

And it is here, finally, that our attention can turn back to the distances of death, and to another narrative mode of engaging with what's gone. Once again, we find ourselves confronted by the seemingly intractable strangeness of Thoreau's elegy, whose subject seems never to appear. Rather than elevate the dead, as elegy is wont to do, *A Week* seems instead to erase him. How are we to make sense of this book as a tribute to John, when it tells us so little about him? How are we to understand the book as an elegy when all Thoreau gives us of his brother – so palpably, so persistently, so insistently – is his absence?

In order to answer these questions, we must, it seems, take Thoreau at his word, and take to heart the logic of intervals and deflection that his book so carefully (and quietly) develops. If the way to engage the historical object is through its pastness – to own (and immerse ourselves in) the interval separating us from it – then, analogously, the way to engage one who has died is through his very real, and very palpable, *goneness*. The living fact commemorates itself, Thoreau has insisted in *A Week*. And the living fact with regard to John is that he has died. Indeed, by the time Thoreau retrospectively composes (and reinvents) the brothers' *Week*, what John is, above all else, is “gone.” If Thoreau applies the principles of history which he elaborates within his text to the practices with which he writes it, then *A Week* must find a way to depict his brother as *lost*, and to figure him as and through loss. John's seeming absence in the text, that is to say, need neither mean that he is unimportant, nor that he is a ghostly or repressed presence waiting to be recovered. It need simply mean that he is gone, and that it is only through “gone”ness that we can possibly hope to know him. Technically, he is there only as a fleeting trace – as little more than a grammatical rhythm or a pluralized pronoun or the gesture toward moments of companionship. Yet he is there, too, as a form of relation, as “the other” whose minimal presence

gives meaning to “the one.” He is there in the many ways in which the book makes absence and inaccessibility and interval felt as affirmative forces, rather than as mere elisions.

This, clearly, is not an elegy that aims to bring John back – in fact, it is a narrative that seems reluctant to put John in at all. And yet, even there, my thoughts (and Thoreau’s) seem to turn back on themselves. Because keeping out – and keeping anonymous – is perhaps as intimate a mode of bringing in – and making known – as any. Because there is a way in which *A Week* suggests that entities we consider to be simple negations (anonymity, absence, distance, remoteness) can in fact demand a kind of attentive cultivation, that understanding modes of not seeing or not knowing (or not companioning) might be just as complicated as understanding their more traditionally affirmative counterparts. In that now-familiar description of the intervals we own at sight, Thoreau calls attention to those unseen lakes, their shores “equally unobserved” by the mountain-dweller’s gaze. What startles me about Thoreau’s choice of adverb is the way it calls attention to its opposite, indirectly suggesting that there might in fact be unequal (non-equivalent) ways of remaining unobserved. We tend to think of anonymity as unequivocal. We tend to think of absence as being impenetrable. But what if there are as many ways of being absent or anonymous as there are of being present or known?

John, it seems, bears within him a kind of polyvalent absence or “goneness” in this text – he is absent because unnamed, absent because unspeaking, absented because undifferentiated in the rhetorical taxonomy of “the one” and “the other” – and, ultimately, absent because dead. There is a way in which these absences become not substitutes for one another but rather contiguous to one another, once again somehow atmospheric in their collective dimensionality, once again resembling those sixty century-old women under the hill. It is a kind of absence (or distance, or remoteness) that stands with its arms outstretched and that allows its interlocutors to

do the same. It is a capacious remoteness, a polyvalent distance, a conceptual space to be inhabited, explored, and traveled through. In understanding and representing (or, perhaps, *not* representing) John in this way, Thoreau teaches us how to have a non-redemptive, non-melancholic relationship to what is gone. Like Jewett, he suspends objects and events (John, death) in favor of conditions (deadness, goneness), ultimately understanding the latter as the ground of relation and navigation alike.

I would like to linger with the possibility of understanding death or “gone”ness or distance precisely *as* a form of (interpersonal) relation. In order to do so, however, I need to perform my own deflection or digression, and turn to the other of Thoreau’s two book-length works, the one that Peck has deemed a “companion volume” to *A Week*.²³ Although *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden* were published five years apart, yielding different responses from nineteenth-century audiences and having inspired different critical receptions since, Thoreau worked on the two texts simultaneously, retrospectively narrating his river journey within the confines of his cabin in the woods. There is a kind of mesmerizing dynamism to be made of this fact, to picture the walls of Walled-in opening out to the expanses of the Merrimack and folding back in again, to picture the joint seasonal rhythm and philosophical atemporality of *Walden* giving way to the passing days of the travel narrative and then fading back into a kind of timelessness. And yet the energy of that simultaneity, once

²³ In his introduction to *A Week*, Peck writes: “Most readers in our time are unaware of the degree to which *A Week* and *Walden* are companion volumes, sharing many of the same themes despite their quite different structures – one built upon a river journey and the other set in place on an idyllic pond” (xi). The point, at least at face value, is simple enough: texts written by the same hand in the same place at the same time can be considered “companion volumes.” But given the complexity of the very notion of companionship in these two texts, what does it mean for one of them to companion the other? What might a deeper understanding of such compositional companionship yield, with regard to our own reading practices?

acknowledged, seems also to stem from and to emerge within each text on its own. In the famous opening to *Walden*, Thoreau explains:

When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord Massachusetts, and learned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again.²⁴

On the one hand, this is a series of descriptions concerned with situatedness, orienting us spatially and temporally to the dimensions of Thoreau's experiment and text (and textual experiment) alike. And yet rather than building a sense of constancy or coherence, the passage proceeds metronomically, its spatial conception alternating with nearly hypnotic regularity between figures of exposure and figures of enclosure. Every other phrase modifying the passage's main verb – lived – begins with "in"; Thoreau's project transpired "in the woods...in a house...in Concord Massachusetts." It is a sequence apparently concerned with burrowing, with revealing the ways in which *Walden* may be argued to be a synonym for insularity or retreat, for a kind of self-identity or self-belonging. And yet between those figures of enclosure inevitably intervenes a figure of exposure or expansiveness, building into an insistently piecemeal portrait of a man alone, on the shore of a pond, far from any neighbor. These latter formulations, we might say, are concerned not with burrowing but instead with *borrowing*, with the ways in which definition and orientation alike are fundamentally relational, even if one's relation of choice is an incarnation of distance.²⁵ Although we think of *Walden* as a project of retreat and self-seclusion,

²⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Works*, ed. William Rossi (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 5. Hereafter cited in the text.

²⁵ I am deriving this play on "burrowing" and "borrowing" in part from the section of "Economy" which details Thoreau's building of his cabin. The section begins: "Near the end of March, 1845, I borrowed an axe and went down to the woods by Walden Pond, nearest to where I intended to build my house, and began to cut down some tall arrowy white pines, still in their youth, for timber. It is difficult to begin without borrowing, but perhaps it is the most generous course thus to permit your fellow-men to have an interest in your enterprise" (31). The narrative proceeds through the purchase and un-building of James

it is also (and perhaps as deeply) a project concerned with forms of engagement. Burrowing and borrowing, that is to say, may in fact be as akin to one another as their playfully similar sounds would suggest.

In this passage, as throughout his text, Thoreau builds belonging and cultivates alienation. He burrows and then is exposed. (As he says in “Economy,” “[t]he house is still but a sort of porch at the entrance of a burrow” [34]). His language opens and closes, expands and retracts, accepts encounter and crafts retreat. Like the man himself, committed to a solitude enlivened by friendship, to a wilderness adjacent to a town, to a project perhaps made radical by the quiet compromises underlying its bold rhetoric, this passage builds momentum through intertwining approach and retreat. Yet these dichotomies seem designed less to present alternatives than to reveal the impossibility (or, rather, undesirability) of choosing between them, less to offer possibilities for inhabitation than to rhetorically perform the impossibility of lingering indefinitely in either state. The passage is about neither the “in” nor the “alone” (“from,” “on”), but rather about the forms of identity and difference between them. It is, it seems, focused on intervals, on what it might mean to live between the “in” and the “on,” between solitude and company, between pond and town. What seems complicated is that it is an interval or a betwixtness that is not a neither *or* a both, but rather something all its own, a kind of remoteness from both remoteness and immediacy. If *Walden* is an experiment in remoteness, it seems, it is not because the cabin in the woods is remote from civilization or because Thoreau is

Collins’s shanty, and Thoreau’s description of how he “dug [his] cellar in the side of a hill sloping to the south, where a woodchuck had formerly dug his burrow, down through sumach and blackberry roots, and the lowest stain of vegetation, six feet square by seven feet deep, to a fine sand where potatoes would not freeze in any winter.... The house is still but a sort of porch at the entrance of a burrow,” before ending by describing that “...in the beginning of May, with the help of some of [his] acquaintances, rather to improve so good an occasion for neighborliness than from any necessity,” he set up the frame of his house (33-34). It is the borrowing which leads Thoreau to the burrowing and back again, a trajectory that would seem to satisfy Thoreau at social and linguistic levels alike.

remote from his neighbors but rather because he is remote from customary definitions of remoteness itself.

Indeed, throughout *Walden*, Thoreau is concerned with relational paradigms that redefine how we understand the relative status (and constitutive intertwinement) of remoteness and proximity, placing the paired concepts of “sufficient distance” and “intimate society” at the heart of his treatment of interpersonal relation. Although distance is the necessary prerequisite for intimacy, however, it is to be understood not as an absence or as a space but instead as a polyvalent mode of engagement with a density and texture all its own. This perhaps first becomes clear in the elliptical closing paragraphs of “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” where Thoreau establishes the “hard bottom” that Robert Pogue Harrison reads as central to *Walden*’s project of dwelling.²⁶

Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to as hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin, having a *point d’appui*, below freshet and frost and fire, a place where you might found a wall or a state, or set a lamp-post safely, or perhaps a gauge, not a Nilometer, but a Realometer, that future ages might know how deep a freshet of shams and appearances had gathered from time to time. (70)

If the hard bottom constitutes the heart of Thoreau’s project in Harrison’s reading of *Walden*, then the freshet and frost and fire constitute the same in mine. For Thoreau’s “Realometer,” designed to plumb the (shifting?) depths of the real like a Nilometer plumbs the (seasonally shifting) depths of the Nile, identifies not the *point d’appui* itself but rather the interval that separates us from it. Thanks to its measurements, “future ages might know how deep a freshet of shams and appearances had gathered from time to time” – and yet the point is not to clear this

²⁶ See Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 1993), p.226ff.

freshet away, to penetrate through its murky depths, but instead to understand it precisely as integral to our getting to the bottom. The real, that is to say, is a function of what it took to get there. The real is a function of what persists and proliferates between us and it. And this understanding of the real as being woven through with distances of various sorts is not only an epistemological trick but also a matter of simple survival. Thoreau continues:

If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career. Be it life or death, we crave only reality. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business. (70)

The cimeter – a word whose form recalls the “Nilometer” and the “Realometer” of the preceding sentence – is not an instrument of measurement but instead a lethal weapon, is the danger that “the real” becomes when encountered directly, without the distances that typically define (our relation to) it. Although the result might be a “[happy]” conclusion to one’s mortal career, it is a conclusion nevertheless; the glimmering sun and right fronting seem a kind of dangerously direct antithesis to the aesthetically pleasing mediation of the landscape glass which Thoreau praised in *A Week*.²⁷

²⁷ Attending to the atmosphere into which he and his companion paddle on Sunday morning (a recurrent conceit of the book – here is the look of the sky, the water, the realms between), Thoreau praises the “intense and almost conscious” stillness of the view before him:

The air was so elastic and crystalline that it had the same effect on the landscape that a glass has on a picture, to give it an ideal remoteness and perfection. The landscape was clothed in a mild and quiet light, in which the woods and fences checkered and partitioned it with new regularity, and rough and uneven fields stretched away with lawn-like smoothness to the horizon, and the clouds, finely distinct and picturesque, seemed a fit drapery to hang over fairy-land. The world seemed decked for some holiday or prouder pageantry, with silken streamers flying, and the course of our lives to wind on before us like a green lane into a country maze, at the season when fruit-trees are in blossom. Why should not our whole life and its scenery be actually thus this distinct? All our lives want a suitable background. (37)

Of interest to Thoreau here are the various forms that seemingly lie between him and unadulterated or whole access to “the landscape,” but which are – he realizes, and we come to realize –in fact what constitute that landscape itself. The woods and fences which partition it, the uneven fields which define the view to the horizon, the clouds which drape over it, and the crystalline, elastic air which through

The more we read of Thoreau, the more we come to understand that, for him, confronting the real – and, indeed, encountering the dead – often means engaging in a kind of strategic distance or deflection. Indeed, the passage continues by shifting its attention and engaging in a kind of rhetorical indirection:

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper, fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born. The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things. I do not wish to be any more busy with my hands than is necessary. My head is hands and feet. I feel all my best faculties concentrated in it. My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and fore-paws, and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these hills. I think that the richest vein is somewhere hereabouts; so by the divining rod and thin rising vapors I judge; and here I will begin to mine. (70)

As Thoreau's metaphors slide from fishing to mining, and as the ground of his inquiry shifts from the breadth of "time" to the specificity of "here" (the hills, this page), we feel in his words a kind of fruitful disorientation, a performance of the strange process of getting from here to there. Indeed, this centrality of relation seems to be thematized within the passage itself. Thoreau "cannot count one," it seems, because "one" on its own is not countable, is not even technically a number at all. He "[knows] not the first letter of the alphabet" because there is no alphabet if there is only "A." Meaning comes only relationally or systematically, he implies, as does the

which the entire scene is viewed become, for Thoreau, an "ideal remoteness" through and from which to aestheticize what he sees. Interestingly, this kind of remote intersession becomes for Thoreau not only a mood of "pageantry" but also the source of "[distinctness]." Although the glass atop the picture may seem to mediate between us and what it covers, to create a kind of artificiality or transparent sheen, for Thoreau it instead has the effect of giving us the background with a new level of clarity. Likewise, poetry for Thoreau "is not recoverable thought, but a hue caught from a vaster receding thought" (264). What is now, we learned above, is hue and color. Poetry is the glimpse we catch of the back-turned figure, or like the sight we have above of the "dimly retreating figure" of the historian. What remains – the wisp, the tone, the hue, the waft of smoke (like Rebecca Solnit's historiographical ghosts and the sage smoke of Mary Austin's *Pocket Hunter* and Heather Love's traces of shame) – comes to constitute the poetic. The past may be then, but history and the poetic are now.

very possibility for identity and integrity. Just as, in *A Week*, there can be no “one” without “the other,” no “voyageur” without “his companion,” here there can be no “first letter” without an “alphabet,” and no “counting” without more than “one.” “Time hides no treasures,” Thoreau told us in *A Week*. “The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things,” he tells us here. Discerning and rifting, it seems, though swift and forceful and deliberate gestures, miss the point if they penetrate right to the “secret of things.” For if time (and space) hide no treasures, then what is it that we hope to find? Perhaps the right approach is simply to “burrow” through the hills – not in search simply of the “richest vein” but also of the “hereabouts” and the hills themselves, of the thin rising vapors and the movement of the diving rod.

This notion of distance as both a constitutive element of relation and a mode of self-preservation appears again in Thoreau’s discussion of the visitors to his Walden Pond cabin. After complaining that “we meet at very short *intervals*, not having had time to acquire any new value for each other” (95, my emphasis), Thoreau shifts the register of discussion from temporality (the intervals at which we meet) to spatiality, addressing the ideal dimensionality of intimate encounter:

One inconvenience I sometimes experienced in so small a house, the difficulty of getting to a sufficient distance from my guest when we began to utter the big thoughts in big words. You want room for your thoughts to get into sailing trim and run a course or two before they make their port. The bullet of your thought must have overcome its lateral and ricochet motion and fallen into its last and steady course before it reaches the ear of the hearer, else it may plough out again through the side of his head. Also, our sentences wanted room to unfold and form their columns in the interval. Individuals, like nations, must have suitable broad and natural boundaries, even a considerable neutral ground, between them. I have found it a singular luxury to talk across the pond to a companion on the opposite side. In my house we were so near that we could not begin to hear, - we could not speak low enough to be heard; as when you throw two stones into calm water so near that they break each other’s undulations. If we are merely loquacious and loud talkers, then we can afford to stand very near each other’s breath; but if we speak reservedly and thoughtfully, we want to be farther apart, that all animal heat and moisture may have a chance to evaporate. If we would enjoy the most intimate society with that in each of us which is without, or above, being spoken to, we must not only be silent, but

commonly so far apart bodily that we cannot possibly hear each other's voice in any case. Referred to this standard, speech is for the convenience of those who are hard of hearing; but there are many fine things which we cannot say if we have to shout. As the conversation began to assume a loftier and grander tone, we gradually shoved our chairs farther apart till they touched the wall in opposite corners, and then commonly there was not room enough. (98)

It's hard not to wonder, reading a passage that was written concomitantly with *A Week*, whether there are fleeting traces of John's death in these lines. As we envision a relationship drained of animal heat, from which all moisture and contact have evaporated, in which silence prevails, in which "we cannot possibly hear each other's voice in any case," the more it seems that meaningful relation, for Thoreau, is predicated upon an *as if*. This is not the *as if* of Elijah Tilley, whose watch persists *as if* his dead wife might still appear, but instead its inverse, a mode of interacting *as if* the interlocutor was not – and never could be – there at all. *As if*, to take Thoreau's imagery to its logical extreme, the interlocutor, like John, were dead. By positing this, I don't mean to suggest that the ideal Thoreauvian interaction imagines or wishes the interlocutor dead (a claim that would play into stereotypical accounts of the author's misanthropy) but rather to suggest the extent to which the distances of death may not be any less assimilable into a Thoreauvian model of relation than are the other (seemingly more mundane) distances that condition our experience of the everyday. By acknowledging the place of death within (and, perhaps, the significance of this particular death to) Thoreau's account of relation, we might expand our own understanding of how endings and losses can condition rather than preclude ethical investment, both in an interpersonal context and in an environmental one.

Indeed, Thoreau seems already to have done this for us in *A Week* itself. In the extended meditation on friendship in the "Wednesday" chapter, which many readers have taken as the most direct reference to John in the book's pages, Thoreau predicates intimate relation not only on silence and distance ("Our finest relations are not simply kept silent about, but buried under a

positive depth of silence, never to be revealed” [223]) but also on ephemerality and temporariness themselves:

Friendship is evanescent in every man’s experience, and remembered like heat lightning in past summers. Fair and flitting like a summer cloud; - there is always some vapor in the air, no matter how long the drought; there are even April showers. Surely from time to time, for its vestiges never depart, it floats through our atmosphere. It takes place, like vegetation in so many materials, because there is such a law, but always without permanent form, through ancient and familiar as the sun and moon, and as sure to come again. The heart is forever inexperienced. They silently gather as by magic, these never failing, never quite deceiving visions, like the bright and fleecy clouds in the calmest and clearest days. The Friend is some fair floating isle of palms eluding the mariner in Pacific seas. (211)²⁸

Once again, as in the “Concord River” passage, where levels of distance mount with the cadence of the prose, here, friendship recedes from immediacy the longer it is described, compared not simply to heat lightning (already that most ephemeral and mysterious of meteorological phenomena) but to heat lightning as remembered from past summers. And yet whereas this description threatens to put friendship strictly in the realm of memory and the past, the passage as a whole is provocatively expansive temporally, its register ranging from the intermittent to the seasonal to the perpetual, from the has been (“remembered...”) to the sometimes is (“from time to time....”) to the never will be (“eluding the mariner...”). Rather than treating the friend as a stable referent buried beneath levels of temporal or spatial remove, the relation (friendship) is

²⁸ There is, clearly, much more to say about the status of transience in *A Week* – a conversation that might productively lead us into psychoanalytic territory, either through Freud’s essay “On Transience,” or through Adam Phillips’s work, particularly *Darwin’s Worms: On Life Stories and Death Stories* (New York: Basic Books, 2000). Transience, it seems, might pose a useful alternative to (or, more precisely, complication of) the paradigms of mourning and melancholia that dominate not only much work on elegy but also much writing on environmental loss. For more on the status of transience in this latter context, see Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, “Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies” (*Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, eds. Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson [Indianapolis & Bloomington: Indiana U P, 2010]).

itself defined by its elusiveness. Evanescence, in other words, persists.²⁹ The friend appears as one who, like the bright and fleecy clouds, only barely appears – or one who, like the fair floating isle of palms, never appears at all.

Thoreauvian Elegy, continued; or, Atmospheric Hollows

This discussion may still beg the question of where John “is” in *A Week*, and where in Thoreau’s rambling, meditative, philosophical pages we are to locate his reckoning with the fact of loss itself. But perhaps we can begin to answer such questions precisely where we are, by acknowledging that the connection between heat lightning and friendship is far from incidental, far from simply the descriptive flair of a philosopher’s mind or a writer’s pen. For a similar logic inheres throughout *A Week*, where (as this discussion already has traced), the objects of our relation (the friend, the mountain peak, the painted landscape, Lovewell, the historical event) are subordinated to the terms of our (non-)access to them, to the levels of mediation that stand (or shimmer, or fade) between observer and observed. And so the entities in the book that feel most immediate are typically atmospheric or medial phenomena (heat lightning; the elastic and crystalline air; the layer of glass; “whose grandfather had, whose father might have”; the veil, the mist, the darkness itself). In other words: atmospheric conditions are what make legible the distances (the *intervals*) constitutive of relation itself.

²⁹ A similar logic inheres in the Rev. Barzillai Frost’s sermon upon the death of John Thoreau. On January 16, 1842, on the pulpit of the First Parish Church of Concord, Frost meditated on “the fleeting nature of human life” by analogizing it to the weather:

The sun rises, and the moving cloud, tinged with rosy light, looks like a curtain dyed in heaven’s own lines hung out from the abodes of the blessed, to give us a glimpse of a brighter world. But the sun rises still higher and the beautiful vision vanishes, and leaves us no trace behind. The flower opens and the dew-drops glitter in the morning sun, and the air is perfumed with its sweetness, and the early traveller stops to gaze on its beauties; but the scythe of the mower passes along, and the grass withereth and the flower fadeth.... Life is a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and often vanishes in the very morning of existence. (Cited in Myerson, 1994, 368.)

I have presented the examples above in part because of the way in which they afford a one-to-one mapping of object to intervening atmosphere: the mountain peak to the elastic and crystalline air, the historical object to the darkness and the veil in which they are cloaked. But attention to meteorological conditions pervades Thoreau's work; they are as much on the surface of Thoreau's narrative as the brothers' skiff is on the surface of the rivers. (This is a parallel to which I will return.) The narrative's tendency to drift into descriptions of the air, the sky, the fog, and the weather has been taken by some critical readers to be as distracting and counterproductive as the text's frequent flights of philosophical fancy, while by others it has been understood as the crowning achievement of a book otherwise defined by its deficiencies. David K. Leff, for instance, argues that although *A Week* does not yet reach the same level of writerly "patience" that *Walden* achieves, it is admirable in its "ability to parse mist and cloud and darkness."³⁰ This, proclaims Leff, is "one of Thoreau's finest effects as a nature writer."

But this, I'd like to suggest, may also be one of Thoreau's finest effects as a philosopher, as a brother, and as a friend. For if atmospheric conditions in the book indicate our simultaneous relation to and distance from the objects that they cloak (or, perhaps, indicate the distance upon which meaningful relation is predicated), then so too do they become a figure for our distance from/relation to objects that never appear. In other words: we might take the book's preoccupation with and commitment to atmospheric description as indicating Thoreau's investment in thinking through relation, distance, and (in)accessibility *as such*. Even in places where objects neither recede into nor emerge from the fog, relation is being figured. Even where John is not, his absence and his *notness* – and Thoreau's (often atmospheric) relationship to them – remain.

³⁰ David K. Leff, *Deep Travel: In Thoreau's Wake on the Concord and Merrimack* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2009), x. Hereafter cited in the text.

Perhaps not surprisingly, this is not the customary way that Thoreauvian elegy is read – and not the customary role that the natural environment is thought to play in the context of Thoreau’s grief. To understand John as being evoked in *A Week* not as a remembered subject or lost object, but rather in the form of his absence itself, is to depart quite radically from the traditional readings of Thoreau’s book. Most readers, understandably, either read for signs of John’s presence (and/or of Thoreau’s pain) or argue that his pervasive absence discredits the work as an elegy. An example of the latter argument appears in *Dark Thoreau*, where John Bridgman insists, near the start of his chapter on *A Week*, that “so anonymous is the presence of Thoreau’s companion on the trip as recounted, we can begin by declaring that it is no tribute to John.”³¹ Examples of the former approach are far more prevalent – in part because they seem

³¹ Although the fact of John’s anonymity may be startling within the typical dictates of elegy, it is less surprising or unusual within the logic of *A Week* itself, where namelessness becomes a privileged trope in Thoreau’s reckoning with the inaccessible. If we return to the “You shall see...They shall see” passage excerpted above and expand its bounds slightly, we will notice both the centrality of anonymity and the potential disruptiveness of proper names:

It is worth the while to make a voyage up this stream, if you go no farther than Sudbury, only to see how much country there is in the rear of us; great hills, and a hundred brooks, and farmhouses, and barns, and haystacks, you never saw before, and men everywhere, Sudbury, that is *Southborough* men, and Wayland, and Nine-Acre-Corner men, and Bound Rock, where four towns bound on a rock in the river, Lincoln, Wayland, Sudbury, Concord....

You shall see men you never heard of before, whose names you don’t know, going away down through the meadows with long-ducking guns, with water-tight boots wading through the fowl-meadow grass on bleak, wintry, distant shores, with guns at half-cock, and they shall see teal, blue-winged, green-winged, shelldrakes, whistlers, black ducks, ospreys, and many other wild and noble sights before night, such as they who sit in parlors would never dream of. You shall see rude and sturdy, experienced and wise men, keeping their castles, or teaming up in their summer’s wood, or chopping alone in the woods, men fuller of talk and rare adventure in the sun and wind and rain than a chestnut is of meat; who were out not only in ’75 and 1812, but have been out every day of their lives; greater men than Homer, or Chaucer, or Shakespeare, only they never got time to say so; they never took to the way of writing.

At the beginning of the passage, proper names serve purely to jar us out of the lilting rhythm of Thoreau’s prose: in the context of the triple meters (“You shall see...they shall see...”) upon whose current the narrative floats, the plodding spondees and trochees that constitute the towns’ names feel like swirling eddies or stultifying backwaters. Indeed, the figures who bear the most importance are the men “whose names you don’t know,” and those “rude and sturdy, experienced and wise men” who fill their days with the fields. When we get to “Homer, or Chaucer, or Shakespeare,” a phrase whose syntax turns trochees into spondees, thereby assimilating bisyllabic names into the familiar triple meter, proper names are no

poised to demonstrate the skill of the astute reader, whose task is to find traces of John's death) beneath the surface or between the lines. Many such readings treat *A Week* as a work with two intertwined aims: to heal pain through the process of writing and to honor John's memory by preserving the brothers' journey in prose. Walter Hesford, who elsewhere cautions against simplifying (or explaining away) *A Week's* complexities, seems content to resort to generic and psychological conventions when it comes to accounting for the book's elegiac aims: "The death

longer rhythmically disruptive; however it is precisely these figures' apparent non-disruptiveness that Thoreau wants to call into question. Merit, Thoreau seems to argue, is not necessarily the province of those whose names we know. Indeed, we would be better served to pay attention to the anonymous scythians in the field, men who "have...written in the earth already, clearing, and burning, and scratching, and harrowing, and ploughing, and subsoiling, in and in, and out and out, and over and over, again and again, erasing what they had already written for want of parchment" (9). Tilled fields here become both a kind of palimpsest and a *tabula rasa*, as important for their constant undoing as for their layers of meaning. Farmers – like mourners, like writers – are perhaps a kind of Penelope.

Even while acknowledging this doing and undoing, Thoreau does not tell us what the men have written; just as their importance lies not in their names, the importance of their "writing" lies not in its content. Rather, it is the dailiness of their enterprise, and the constancy of its rhythm, that Thoreau seeks to evoke. As his present progressive verbs mount into an almost hypnotizing cadence – the "keeping" and "teaming" and "chopping" of the early description giving way to the farmers' "clearing, and burning, and scratching, and harrowing, and ploughing, and subsoiling" before mounting into the "in and in, and out and out, and over and over, again and again, erasing..." – we come to realize that significance resides not in name, and not in permanence, but in deed and cadence and sound. The illegibility of the men's "writing," the anonymity of their identities, and the rhythm of their enterprise (both in practice and on the page) become their most important characteristics of all. Likewise, in the passage detailing the working of historical practice, the cadence of deflection comes to the fore in part because of the opacity of the names that it propels: "There is a good instance of the manner in which all history began, in Alwakidis' Arabian Chronicle: 'I was informed by *Ahmed Almatin Aljorhami*, who had it from *Rephaa Ebn Kais Alamiri*, who had it from *Saiph Ebn Fabalah Alchatquarmi*, who had it from *Thabet Ebn Alkamah*, who said he was present at the action.'" Although some criticize Thoreau for the clear exoticism of his account, "exotic" names here seem self-consciously wielded so as to make a lexical and philosophical point. For as the translated bumps up against the untranslatable, we are left treating the proper name as impenetrable, as non-signifying, as a kind of blankness (or opacity) whose importance comes from the way in which it is scaffolded or propelled. Indeed, what signifies in this sentence are not the names (not the manifest subject or topic or content) but rather, startlingly, the subordinate clauses and their echoing prepositional phrases. It is cadence and connection – the workmanlike "linking words" – that necessarily take center stage. What we are left with are interstices and intervals. What we are left with is less name or story than rhythm and *count*.

Anonymity, in other words, becomes not simply an absence of naming but an affirmative technique. By not naming John, Thoreau makes his brother become notable in his namelessness, notable in his remoteness. Anonymity makes us feel inaccessibility as such, while also throwing into relief the fact that *knowing* (about) someone is not the only way to be in relation with him or her. We relate to John through his anonymity just as Thoreau relates to John through his death.

of his brother was a shattering experience for Thoreau, complicated by guilt over not being open enough in his love for him in life, and not being able to rescue him from the grip of lockjaw. Thoreau works out his guilt in his writing, overcomes his doubts about the efficacy of love, and sustains through art his brother's life."³² Like Lebeaux, Hesford understands Thoreau's elegiac travelogue as a therapeutic enterprise, one designed to ameliorate (or even to overcome) John's absence and to reconcile Henry to love and loss alike. John persists here in the form of a written surrogate for his living self – a surrogate through which Thoreau can (successfully, this time) reckon with everything he and his brother failed to resolve in life.

A slightly more complicated and more provocative iteration of this argument appears in William Rossi's essay on Thoreauvian elegy and friendship, where he engages at some length with David Robinson's recent work:

Although [*A Week*] has often been read as the author's means of distancing himself from or displacing his grief, as David Robinson shrewdly observes, the narrator "not only remembers his brother but remembers for his brother, assuming a voice . . . that seems to speak for them both." That voice constitutes a "remarkably unified 'we,' essentially absorbing John's vision into himself, or, in another sense, giving John new life through his own eyes." Rather than taking the form of a psychic divestment in the lost object (in the Freudian model of mourning), that is, Thoreau's elegy reconstructs the siblings' past trip as a present narrative act with the deceased brother as a symbolic participant in the survivor's ongoing existence. As an unnamed but active presence in *A Week*, . . . John is neither displaced nor embalmed but rather enlivened through narrative memory, the friend and brother incorporated into our experience of reading the text as into its making.³³

Rather than reconsider what "displacing" might mean or entail, Rossi (via Robinson) turns an apparent binary on its head, arguing that Thoreau doesn't distance (grief) but instead confronts (it), preserving and even revivifying his brother through the present tense and plural voice of *A*

³² Walter Hesford, "Fishing for the Words of Life: Norman MacLean's 'A River Runs Through It' (*Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 34.1 [Winter, 1980]), 40. Hereafter cited in the text.

³³ William Rossi, "Performing Loss, Elegy, and Transcendental Friendship" (*The New England Quarterly* 81.2 [June, 2008]), 268-269. Hereafter cited in the text.

Week. Although I find promising Rossi's insistence that John, though unnamed, remains "active...in *A Week*," I'm not sure why the terms of that presence need to be quite so *present*, quite so lively, quite so directly participatory – why the John Thoreau of *A Week*, in other words, needs so insistently to resemble the John Thoreau who lived. Indeed, Rossi's (and Robinson's) own language positions Thoreau as determinedly retrospective; he *remembers* his brother by *reconstructing* their journey (and vice versa). Beyond the fact that, as Linck C. Johnson has persuasively shown, the composition process of *A Week* involved far more invention than reconstruction,³⁴ the bias toward retrospect fails to account for *A Week*'s investment in the terms of the present – even when, or perhaps precisely when, the terms of the present are written in the form of absence.³⁵

H. Daniel Peck, one of the contemporary critics most deeply engaged and invested in *A Week*, responds to Thoreau's treatment of loss in more forceful terms still. In his introduction to the most recent Penguin edition of the book, Peck argues that Thoreau treats memory, history, and elegy as practices that both recuperate lost objects and redeem loss itself: "By giving witness to such [forgotten] figures, and their prior existence along the shores, Thoreau redeems them for his readers. This process of redemptive remembering involves cultures as well as individual (Wordsworthian) figures like the old brown-coated man" (xiv). Indeed, throughout Peck's reading, history – like memory – is a redemptive process, one that brings the forgotten past back into the present (or *to presence*) and that thus not only ameliorates loss but also obviates distance itself. Rather than reckoning with absence and inaccessibility as such, Peck's Thoreau overcomes (and, elsewhere "transcend[s]" [xvii]) it. The ultimate aim (like in readings of *Pointed Firs*) is to

³⁴ See *Thoreau's Complex Weave*, xi. See also Lebeaux, *Thoreau's Seasons*, 3.

³⁵ I will leave unexamined for the moment the melancholic implications of Rossi's emphasis on incorporation; these, however, will return before we are done.

successfully complete acts of preservation and safe-keeping; as Peck elaborates in his monograph *Thoreau's Morning Work*:

[I]f the testimony of Thoreau's witnesses describes a discontinuity between the worlds of then and now, from another point of view their memories of lost worlds can be said to restore continuity. By remembering they provide images of plenitude and beauty that otherwise would have been irretrievably lost. The stories they tell about the past are essential acts of preservation.... As Thoreau joins his own memories to those of others, he and the book he is making (the composite story he is telling) create a new kind of continuity, a continuity of consciousness. In this way, remembering becomes redemptive. (14)

Peck's argument highlights where this insistence on retrospect – and on objects – ultimately leads. For such a logic of continuity, when extended indefinitely, yields a kind of temporal, experiential, and affective flattening. The forgotten figures' "existence on shores" is no longer allowed to be "prior"; change is subsumed under retrieval, preservation, and restoration³⁶ and "plenitude and beauty" replace partiality and mediation. There is a kind of counterproductive idealism here as to what historical practice and elegiac writing can achieve; the unequivocal emphasis on recovery and presence seems, in the end, to undermine history and elegy themselves. Peck's logic suggests that the only way to be lost is to be "irretrievably so"; there is no room for the possibility that loss might have a kind of purchase, might itself be meaningfully present. The focus on the redemption of lost objects (and the overcoming of their attendant distances), in other words, overlooks the conditions and persistence of lostness itself.

This emphasis on redemptive remembering (or recuperation) is not Peck's invention, of course; such terms are also central to our conventional understanding of elegy – whose primary functions, according to the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, are "to lament,

³⁶ The fact that these are central terms in contemporary ecology and environmentalism is not lost on me; just as my reading of Jewett aimed to think forms of relation and loss apart from paradigms of preservation, I aim here to think elegy apart from retrieval and preservation.

praise, and console.”³⁷ The movement from loss to plenitude, or from pain to consolation, is central to this logic; Jahan Ramazani deems it a “psychological propensity of the genre to translate grief into consolation.”³⁸ The source of this consolation, traditionally, is a gesture of substitution; Max Cavitch argues that “the practice of elegy is fundamentally devoted to the enshrinement of compensatory memory,”³⁹ while Ramazani suggests that, through its act of artistic production, elegiac writing “install[s] a substitute for the lost person” (xi). The elegist traditionally “finds recompense...in making this very poem, redirecting his affection from the lost friend to the brilliant artifact that is in some measure a replacement for the man it mourns” (Ramazani 3). Temporally, then, recompense manifests itself as continuity; as Cavitch writes, elegy is characterized by its “reflexive appeal for remembrance, [its] frequently self-conscious ordering of poetic lineages, [and] in [its] framing of questions of inheritance and continuity” (2). Indeed, in this way the traditional elegy not only explores questions of legacy but also inaugurates them; according to the *Princeton Encyclopedia*, “[o]ften involving questions of initiation and continuity, inheritance and vocation, the e[legy] has been a favored form not only for mourning deceased poets but also for formulating ambitions and shaping poetic genealogies” (324).

Such an emphasis on (redemptive) retrospect and (linear, genealogical) continuity becomes even more pronounced when we begin to track the centrality of nature and environmentality to the development of elegiac writing. For even those works not technically

³⁷ “Elegy,” *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993), 324.

³⁸ Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 1994), 3-4. Hereafter cited in the text. For a similar definition of elegy, see M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1999), 72-73.

³⁹ Max Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2007), 143. Hereafter cited in the text.

classified (or classifiable) as pastoral elegy frequently look to the natural world for empathy, solace, and escape alike.⁴⁰ Indeed, the understanding of nature as a place of retreat and as a redemptive balm in the face of loss appears time and again in discussions of Thoreau's work. Linck C. Johnson argues that "[l]ike Milton in 'Lycidas,' Thoreau tried to place his brother's death within the context of nature's seasonal cycle of birth and rebirth. But, in contrast to Milton, Thoreau looked solely to the natural world for consolation rather than seeking it in a realm of supernatural order" (xiii). In Johnson's account, the book finds the solace it seeks when the brothers' boat returns home to Concord:

Thoreau concluded the book on a note of triumphant innocence and expectancy. As its keel recognizes "the Concord mud where the flattened weeds still preserved some semblance of its own outline having scarce yet recovered themselves since its departure," the brothers leap "gladly on shore" and attach their boat "to the little apple tree whose stem still bore the mark which its claim had worn – in the chafing of the spring freshets." ... In contrast to the dead "weeds" and "stems of trees" that float by, "fulfilling their fate," at the end of "Concord River" ..., these resilient weeds and tough little tree are final examples of the rugged varieties discovered in the course of the voyage. Indeed, that apple tree, which has survived the chafing of experience and whose wound is slowly

⁴⁰ In Timothy Morton's words, "[w]hether or not it is explicitly ecological, elegy's formal topics and tropes are environment. When Orpheus weeps for Eurydice, animals and trees listen. Mountains and streams echo back the tears and cries of the protagonist or the narrator. The 'affective fallacy' enjoys a second lease of life in ecological poetics." Part of the consolation, it seems, comes from the perceived simplicity and innocence of the natural world, from the capacity of pastoral elegy to return us to an earlier moment and a simpler time. Indeed, if elegy is by definition retrospective, then pastoral or environmental elegy is all the more so; as Morton succinctly argues, "[p]astoral is about the past" (251). Jonathan Bate, likewise, argues that "[w]hat is vulgarly called 'nature poetry' is usually consumed in a spirit of nostalgia. It evokes a lost pre-urban world, a lost childhood, a lost Eden. The mode of pastoral has always been closely linked to the mood of elegy." Indeed, Thoreau is often taken to be a nostalgic writer, one more invested in the timelessness of nature and the glories of the historical past than in the social and political demands of his present. Bridgman, for one, argues that Thoreau's "general mood" during the composition of *A Week* "was regressive. He was engaged in a double withdrawal – not only to Walden Pond, but also into the past, sailing in memory down the Merrimack, away from the failures and loneliness of his life and away from the disapproval of a Concord society that he could not bring himself to leave permanently" (27-28). Once again, we see here the presumption – familiar from the work of Lebeaux – that the only way to engage is to confront, that moving "away from" necessarily constitutes avoidance. Such presumptions, of course, also dictate those readings that take the Walden experiment as an exercise in hermeticism and worldly disengagement – that don't begin to account (as does Rebecca Solnit in "Prisons and Paradises," the introduction to *Storming the Gates of Paradise*) for the relationship between huckleberrying and politics, that don't begin to wrestle with the terms of (to cite Shannon Mariotti) "Thoreau's democratic withdrawal."

healing, is a fit icon for its creator, whose recovery from the trauma of John's death is enacted in *A Week*. With those "spring freshets," sure signs of the seasonal renewal promised by the autumnal landscape in "Friday," Thoreau thus completed the transformation of the river from an emblem of time and transience to a symbol of nature's permanence, a final reaffirmation of the signs of continuity celebrated earlier in *A Week*.

By depicting their voyage as a withdrawal to a timeless, pastoral world, Thoreau at once commemorated John's death, resolved the problems associated with that death, and adumbrated the kind of life that might be led in *New England*, the natural frame for his vision of a brave new world. (83-84)⁴¹

Once again, solace here is predicated on a withdrawal (social, temporal, and spatial alike) associated with non-involvement. In keeping with the familiar paradigms of the elegy (and elegiac reading), Johnson's account slides between the environment as material reality (that shore upon which the triumphant voyagers leap; the resilient weeds marked – but not irrevocably so – by the brothers' vessel; the species "discovered in the course of the voyage") and the environment as symbolic presence (the apple tree as "a fit icon for its creator; the river itself as emblem of permanence); between nature as reassuringly timely (in its predictable seasonality) and nature as essentially timeless; between time and experience as linear and definitive ("survived"; "resolved the problems"; "final reaffirmation"; "final examples") and time and experience as cyclical and recursive (and thus perhaps open-ended still). Some of this ambiguity is Thoreau's own, of course,⁴² and yet I can't help but be discomfited by Johnson's account, in part because his symbology feels so much simpler than Thoreau's writing (or elegy) itself. The quest to establish a one-to-one correlation between objects from the natural world and the

⁴¹ Peck, similarly, reads the conclusion of the book as a final "movement from historical time to natural or cyclical time" (xx). Although, as he acknowledges, "rivers, and voyages upon them, have served as metaphors of transience and mortality," of the passage of time itself, the rivers in *A Week* "also support a spiritual buoyancy.... [T]he book's larger structure enables it to transcend and redeem the individual losses it recounts" (xiii).

⁴² For an incisive account of Thoreau's tendency to slide between rhetorical registers, see Barbara Johnson, "A Hound, a Bay Horse, and a Turtle Dove: Obscurity in *Walden*," *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1987).

Thoreau brothers themselves (“that apple tree...is a fit icon for its creator”) once again masks the conditions of loss and absence themselves. Although Johnson gestures toward questions of duration and ongoingness – in, for instance, his reference to the apple’s trees “wound[, which] is slowly healing” – by and large he presents a triumphalist account, where loss becomes a skin that Thoreau successfully sheds, where the line between grief and healing, between absence and wholeness, is as clear as the line between water and land. In Johnson’s reading, Thoreau moves forward only by moving on; his “brave new world” seems little to involve navigating the conditions of the old. David M. Robinson reads a similar importance into the end of the river voyage, but understands its centrality as being interwoven with the biographical retreat into nature that accompanied (or facilitated) the composition process: “It was not Thoreau’s return to Concord after the 1839 boating trip but [his] subsequent withdrawal to Walden that initiated what seemed to be a new, ‘natural’ life for him. Life by the pond, his own and that of the animals and plants around him, gave him the ability to reenact imaginatively that moment of return as a moment of redemption.”⁴³ Whether redemption comes when a boat hits shore or when a narratively reconstructed boat hits a narratively reconstructed shore, both critics treat “recovery” as a destination (or at least as an identifiable threshold), one which may be easily mapped, easily tracked, and easily recognized when it arrives. The duration of the journey itself (and the readiness with which it loses its course) is subordinated to its “triumphant” end, just as experience is subsumed under “innocence” and loss gives way to “continuity.”

But what if we want to take the rest of the journey seriously in Thoreau’s processes of mourning and elegizing alike? What if, in other words, the endlessly digressive, frequently suspended days on the river are not simply steps on the way to recovery or redemption but

⁴³ David M. Robinson, *Natural Life: Thoreau’s Worldly Transcendentalism* (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 2004), 2. Hereafter cited in the text.

instead significant in their own right? What if there some kinship between the way that plot and narrative recede and the way that loss is expressed or felt?

In contrast to redemptive (and, we might add, temporally linear and affectively normative) accounts like Robinson's and Johnson's, I want to argue that John's death yields – and is legible in – the text's construction of an *intimate absence*, a space (a hollow, an embodied remoteness) that becomes both the ground and the object of relationality.⁴⁴ Rather than commemorating John, in other words, the book engages with the fact that he is gone, and with his goneness itself. On its own, then, Thoreau's environmentality neither soothes nor redeems – rather, it serves to make manifest (to help us feel) the interval or gap that death engenders. To reread elegy in Thoreau, then we must reread the relationship of environmentality to loss – and rethink where in (representations of) nature we look for answers to such questions. Central to my reading are not symbols of presence, but rather spaces of absence, not symbolic objects from the natural world (a resilient apple tree, a stagnant or flowing river, etc.) but rather hollows of time and space and the atmospheric phenomena that fill them. To make such an argument is not to succumb to the affective fallacy, to suggest that rainy weather (for instance) reflects the pain of the observing subject. Rather, I wish to suggest something that is simultaneously more and less personal: that by attending to medial conditions with the same acuity that he attends to the objects that appear against their backdrop, Thoreau manages to make the dimensionality of absence itself felt. And by doing so through a description of what are essentially meteorological

⁴⁴ If my account has an analog in any part of Johnson's reading, it is in his fleeting attention to "those flattened weeds still preserved some semblance of [the keel's] own outline having scarce yet recovered themselves since its departure." I am interested in how *A Week* attends to change and absence rather than needing to overcome them. I am interested in the state of being "scarce yet recovered" – and in considering the possibility that comfort in the wake of death (or sense in the wake of death) may take a form other than wholeness or "full recovery." The weeds, in other words, may long retain the shape of the keel, if perhaps less visibly so as time goes on.

phenomena, he also changes the affective register of elegy. For weather is the neutral topic par excellence; grammatically and affectively impersonal, its reports feel purely descriptive, removed from emotional intensity and judgment alike.⁴⁵ (Here, perhaps, we are beginning to (re)turn to the matter of how boring *A Week* so often feels.) And if we want to think of atmospheric conditions as a medium through which things happen, it may be worth remembering not only that Thoreau once described his own daily writings as a “meteorological journal of the mind”⁴⁶ but also that Thoreau’s readers often characterize his work in atmospheric terms. Joseph Wood Krutch, for one, critiquing the section of *A Week* focusing on friendship, argued that “[f]ew passages in [Thoreau’s] writings...are so *misty*.”⁴⁷

If we want further sanctioning for Thoreau’s investment in mediality, we need only remember that he is also the thinker and writer and naturalist who argued – first in that meteorological journal of the mind, and later in the “Sounds” chapter of *Walden* – that “[t]he echo is to some extent an independent sound – and therein is the magic and charm of it. It is not merely a repetition of my voice – but it is in some measure the voice of the wood.” The original entry (from 1851) is worth citing at some length:

I hear Lincoln Bell tolling for church. At first I thought of the telegraph harp. Heard at a distance the sound of the bell acquires a certain vibratory hum, as it were from the air through which it passes – like a harp – All music is harp music at length – As if the atmosphere were full of strings vibrating to the music. It is not the mere sound of the bell but the humming in the air that enchants me – just azure tint which much air or distance imparts delights the eye. It is not so much the object as the object clothed with an azure veil. All sound heard a great distance thus tends to produce the same music – vibrating the strings of a universal lyre. There comes to me a melody which the air has strained. – which has conversed with every leaf and needle of the woods. It is by no means the sound of the bell as heard near at hand, and which at this distance I can plainly distinguish – but

⁴⁵ For more on the impersonality of weather, see Anne-Lise François, “Unspeakable Weather; or, The Rain Romantic Constatives Know,” *Phantom Sentences: Essays in linguistics and literature presented to Ann Banfield*, eds. Robert S. Kawashima, Gilles Philippe, and Thelma Sowley (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008).

⁴⁶ Cited in Lebeaux, *Thoreau’s Seasons*, xiv

⁴⁷ Joseph Wood Krutch, *Henry David Thoreau* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1948), 33.

its vibrating echoes that portion of the sound which the elements take up and modulate. A sound which is very much sifted and refined before it reaches my ear. The echo is to some extent an independent sound – and therein is the magic and charm of it. It is not merely a repetition of my voice – but it is in some measure the voice of the wood.

Although emphasis initially is placed here on implements of sounding – the Lincoln Bell, the telegraph harp, the universal lyre – what comes to the fore in this entry are not the sounds themselves but instead the wood – and its distances – through which sound travels and by which it is changed. What Thoreau hears – and values – is not the sound of the bell but the voice of the wood, not “the object [but] the object clothed with an azure veil.” The power and meaning of the scene, in other words, comes from the way in which distance itself resonates, and in which distance itself becomes a kind of resonator. (This passage, not surprisingly, serves as Morton’s primary example of mediality in *Ecology Without Nature* (39)). While Linck C. Johnson argues that, in Thoreau’s work, “sound is a vehicle of the correspondence between past and present,” this passage from the Journal suggests just the opposite: that sound is a vehicle by which the distance between past and present (or between the two sides of the wood) can itself be felt. Rather than collapsing the linear time that the church bell tolls, the wood seems to dilate it. Indeed, in his essay on environmental elegy, Morton (no longer writing explicitly about the Lincoln wood but likely still thinking of it) argues that “[e]choes are ecological in the precise sense that they render to us a sense of the surrounding world, just as the echolocation of bats provides them with a sense of space and distance: ‘She is walking in the meadow,/And the woodland echo rings’ (Tennyson, ‘Maud’: ll.437-8)” (252).⁴⁸

⁴⁸ And questions of sound and echo and their constitutive distances themselves resonate throughout Thoreau’s journal in the weeks surrounding John’s death. On January 8, 1842, three days before John’s death, Thoreau mused: “Am I so like thee, brother, that the cadence of two notes affects us alike?” On February 21, as Thoreau breaks his silence, sound not only measures relation but becomes an index of inaccessibility itself: “I was always conscious of sounds in nature which my ears could never hear, - that I caught but the prelude to a strain. She always retreats as I advance. Away and behind is she and her

In order to make sense of what it might mean to live within – and to navigate – this intimate absence, I have had to turn not only beyond criticism (both on Thoreau’s elegiac aims on elegy more generally), but also beyond Thoreau’s own pages. In *Death’s Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve*, a project inspired in part by an intellectual preoccupation and in part by her experience grieving her husband’s premature death, Sandra Gilbert – herself also a poet and reluctant elegist – explains that “the word ‘widow’ comes from the Indo-European *widwhe*, meaning ‘to be empty, to be separated,’ to be ‘divided,’ ‘destitute,’ or ‘lacking.’ Death has entered the widow, this etymology implies, and she has entered death, for she is filled with vacancy and is dissolved into a void, a state of lack or non-being that is akin to, if not part of, the state into which the dead person has journeyed, fallen, or been drawn” (25). I was struck immediately by this notion of the mourner’s permeability, by the sense that grief is, perhaps above all else, an openness to being entered precisely by *emptiness*, a vulnerability to coming to understand oneself as a kind of hollow. The possibility that this state of emptiness is “akin to, if not part of, the state into which the dead person has journeyed, fallen, or been drawn” may sound like a terrifying precariousness, but in fact seems to function as a reassuring remedy to the “hermetic impermeability” that she experienced in the case of prior losses. (Important, too, is the fact not only that is she vulnerable to death’s emptiness, but also that death itself is somehow vulnerable or open to her.) A less sanguine (in part because more raw) account of this hollowing comes in Denise Riley’s description of the (non-)flow of time in the wake of her son’s sudden death: “If you had once sensed the time of your child as quietly uncoiling inside your own, then

meaning. Will not this faith and expectation make to itself ears at length? I never saw to the end, nor heard to the end; but the best part was unseen and unheard. I am like a feather floating in the atmosphere: on every side is depth unfathomable.” And March 8: “What is this music? Why, thinner and more evanescent than ether: subtler than sound, for it is only a disposition of sound. It is to sound what color is to matter. It is the color of a flame, or of the rainbow, or of water.” John is no more directly referenced in the journal than he is in *A Week*. Instead, once again, what we get are distances and sound.

when that child is cut away by its death, your doubled inner time is also ‘untimely ripped.’...A sculptural imagination rises to grip you. The intuited hollow of the old shelter for the living child has now been gouged out of you.”⁴⁹ Whereas Riley’s initial portrait of this account seems insistently (and necessarily) non-redemptive (even the hollow has been gouged out; there is no possibility of filling the gap even with Gilbert’s acknowledged “emptiness”), near the end of her (non-)narrative, she reflects that “[h]alf bitten away by the child’s disappearance, your time is nevertheless augmented – for the time of the dead is, from now on, contained within your own.”

Where there is hollowing, in other words, there also exists the potential for filling, and for fullness. But what is this fullness if not simply nostalgic or (to once again borrow Peck’s term) redemptive? How do we fill a gap without losing track of the very fact of our loss? For answers, we might defect our attention once again, and turn to a contemporary of Thoreau’s (to whom Riley herself often looks): the poet Emily Dickinson. In 1863, Dickinson instructed:

To fill a Gap
Insert the Thing that caused it –
Block it up
With Other – and ’twill yawn the more –
You cannot solder an Abyss
With Air –

Like so many of Dickinson’s poems, this one becomes increasingly elusive the more we linger with it, the less straightforwardly didactic the more we seek to let it teach. For if we replace

⁴⁹ Denise Riley, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (Capsule Editions, 2012). E-Book. Such accounts of hollowing and emptiness (of the materiality of absence) pervade the literature of loss and grief. For instance, in the personal narrative that opens her academic study of death, dying, and embodiment, Laura E. Tanner writes: “When I tried, after my father’s death, to unbend my body from the posture of care giving, to straighten up and reaffirm a wholeness lost through intimacy with the physical and psychical experience of dying, I found myself locked in a grief that *formed itself around the lost contours of his missing body*” (2, my emphasis). Likewise, Marie Howe opens her poem “The Gate” by reflecting: “I had no idea that the gate I would step through/to finally enter this world// would be *the space my brother’s body made*” (my emphasis).

Dickinson's general language with specific examples, the more we realize that the logic here is not of redemption or recuperation but rather of experiencing loss anew. If "[t]o fill a Gap" we need only "Insert the Thing that caused it," then we can envision filling a (material) fissure in the bedrock with an earthquake; the (simultaneously figural and real) hole in the ozone layer with the hissing fluorocarbons we abandoned in the 1990s; the (metaphoric) gap in our hearts with a loved one's death.⁵⁰ When faced with a Gap, we seek not to suture it but to acknowledge it, to fill it with the dynamism of loss itself. Indeed, this dynamism itself seems to be part of the point, for the terms of Dickinson's account are insistently asymmetrical. Ultimately what we are inserting is less a static or monolithic "Thing" than a dynamic process ("that *caused* it"), thereby making loss and grief and absence – and the navigation of them – an ongoing process, one that acknowledges the missing (*noun*) and the missing (*verb*) alike.⁵¹ (Here we may think of the

⁵⁰ My thanks to Daphna Atias, who first suggested a similar reading of the poem to me in 2005.

⁵¹ In my final days working on this dissertation, an article by Augusten Burroughs appeared in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*. Adapted from his forthcoming book, the piece (titled "How to Live Unhappily Ever After") seeks to complicate the imperative to happiness in American culture, and concludes with a reflection on (not) healing whose terminology echoes Dickinson's language in "To fill a Gap":

In time, to your friends, you will appear to have recovered from your loss. All that really happened, you'll think, is that the hole in the center of your life has narrowed just enough to be concealed by a laugh. And yet, you might feel a pressure for it to be true. You might feel that "enough" time has passed now, that the hole at the center of you should not be there at all.

But holes are interesting things. As it happens, we human beings are able to live just fine with many holes of many sizes and shapes. Pleasure, love, compassion, fulfillment; these things do not leak out of holes of any size. So we can be filled with holes and loss and wide expanses of unhealed geography—and we can also be excited by life and in love and content at the exact same moment.

...The truth about healing is that you don't need to heal to be whole. And by whole, I mean damaged, missing pieces of who you were, your heart—missing what feels like some of your most important parts. And yet, not missing any part of you at all. Being, in truth, larger than you were before.

Where Burroughs reflects that "you don't need to heal to be whole," his words – like Thoreau's, like Dickinson's – also suggest that (traditional) wholeness, like (traditional) happiness, is not necessarily the goal. In its reflections on the whole that incorporates damage and missing, on the self that can be enlarged or augmented by absence (and holes), on the gap that can be filled with loss rather than with solace, Burroughs's piece resembles the work of queer theorists who recently have resisted the goal of happiness, linked as it so often is to normative relationships (especially marriage) and predetermined developmental trajectories. (See in particular Sara Ahmed's and Heather Love's contributions to a special issue of *New*

fickleness of weather patterns, of the way in which Thoreau's skies inevitably change as his days unfold.)

One question that the final two lines of Dickinson's poem implicitly encourage us to ask is *how* to solder an Abyss (if not with Air, then with What?); another, however, may be what we *can* do to an Abyss with Air (if not solder, then What?). Although this may not be exactly what W.S. Merwin means, I am struck by the possibility, gestured toward in his brief and startling poem "Separation,"⁵² that absence may manifest itself as color, or a similar sensory – rather than affective – experience. For in *A Week*, absence often becomes felt medially: as weather, as fog, as the air through which we see and hear (or don't, or sometimes do), as a kind of thickening. Thoreau is deeply concerned (or preoccupied) throughout the book with atmospheric conditions and the various lenses through which we see. (By his own description, *A Week* is "open" and "unroofed," "lying open under the *ether* - & permeated by it! Open to all weathers – not easy to be kept on a shelf."⁵³) You cannot solder an Abyss/With Air – . Indeed. But perhaps you can fill an Abyss with sensory impressions as they dissipate and change atmospherically: with "a strain of music" (140) and "the barking of the house-dogs, from the loudest and hoarsest bark to the faintest aerial palpation under the eaves of heaven, from the patient but anxious mastiff to the timid and wakeful terrier, at first loud and rapid, then faint and slow, to be imitated only in a whisper; wow-wow-wow-wow-wo-wo-w-w" (34), with "atmospheric tints and various lights and

Formations on "The Happiness Turn.") If I remain convinced that Thoreau's goal in *A Week* is something other than "recovery" (either his own emotional recovery or the recovery of his lost brother), then I am equally convinced that his affective goal/register/end is something quite different from traditional happiness.

⁵² The poem in its entirety reads:

Your absence has gone through me
Like thread through a needle.

Everything I do is stitched with its color.

⁵³ June 29, 1851 journal entry, cited in Peck, "Introduction," pp.xi-xii

shades” (123) and “vapor in the air” (211) – particularly if filling is designed not to negate a loss but instead to help us differently inhabit it, to differently feel its dimensions.

This said, atmospheric metaphors might seem, if anything, all too familiar in the context of death. For altered sight in particular is a highly conventional (and conventionalized) symptom of grief, described (and depathologized) in nearly all handbooks on mourning. “I’m seeing through a haze,” we say. Or “I’m seeing through a fog.” The world seems remote, surreal, and far away. I’m in a daze. Normalcy has receded. Or, to borrow differently evocative language from Dickinson, “everything that ticked – has stopped – and space stares all around.”⁵⁴ But what is different about my reading is how it diminishes the importance of that preposition – *through* – and the objects to which it leads. For *A Week* doesn’t take as its point the object to be seen through the haze (as if we must remember that we will eventually recover, get over loss, be able to see the world again through clear eyes). In Thoreau, in other words, the haze is the point. The haze not only affords access to access and relationality themselves, but is also a way of making gone-ness present, of making us feel the hollow that death has carved, and in which both we and the dead may be said to persist. What are we to feel is the space and the distance and the elements through which sight itself must pass.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Emily Dickinson, “It was not Death –,” *The Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R.W. Franklin (Cambridge & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard U P, 2005).

⁵⁵ Readings of *A Week*, not surprisingly, often treat fog primarily as a perceptual obstacle (both materially and symbolically speaking). In *Dark Thoreau*, for instance, Bridgman cites a series of lines from “Tuesday” to argue that “This early sentence presented Thoreau’s problem: ‘Though we were enveloped in mist as usual, we trusted that there was a bright day behind it’ (179). Or, as he put it in an accompanying lyric: ‘In each dewdrop of the morning/Lies the promise of a day’ (179). A part of Thoreau very much wanted to believe that a heaven lay behind the obscure atmosphere of daily life, or that it could be found at the end of the arduous journey. Were these conditions true, Thoreau could then explain away the miseries of his life as being present either because one’s vision was not yet able to penetrate to reality or because they were a test to make sure that only the worthy achieved Camelot. Given these two possibilities, Thoreau was temperamentally inclined to elect the one that would involve his clearing his mind of distorting vapors until he could see the truth he hoped was there” (42). Bridgman goes on to analogize the distorting powers of fog (which threaten or at least defer the goal of reaching the object

A Week, in other words, makes loss and absence and objectlessness themselves environmental. And so when we read, at the start and end of each day of the voyage, descriptions of the patterns of light and fog, of watery sounds and the sounds of voices over the water, we may take ourselves to be firmly in the realm of travelogue – that genre predicated on orientation, on immediacy, on perception. But as I have been trying to suggest, even these seemingly most descriptive of moments bear within them another resonance – that of atmospherically filling the gaps of the text, so as to afford us the contours of goneness and absence and distance themselves. If we are in search of John, in other words, we might begin by saying that the fog over the water is where he is – or, more properly, where he is not, and where that *not-ness* itself can most readily and most palpably be felt.⁵⁶

hidden within it) to the distracting powers of Thoreau's own prose (which threaten the ostensible goal of narrative linearity or plot development): "As we cannot distinguish objects through this dense fog,' Thoreau elects to interrupt the narrative of 'Tuesday' almost immediately with a digression" (43).

⁵⁶ By settling into the realm of fog and atmospheric conditions, we may also seem to have placed ourselves firmly in the realm of the environmental, and left the queer behind. However, the prevalence of atmospheric metaphors and descriptors in recent works of queer theory suggests that it may be useful to think queerness itself in terms of mediality rather than "orientation" and to locate the queerness of history less in queer historical persons or in paradigms of contact and pleasure but instead in terms of the non-locatability or non-harnessability of mediality itself. See in particular Castiglia and Looby's introduction to their co-edited special issue of *ESQ*, and essays in the *After Sex?* volume which, in the course of their reflections on the state of queer theory posit that "(Numbness is not a lack of feeling, as you know. It is a hum)" (Lauren Berlant); "[there are] a wide range of kinds of pleasures to be taken in colors – a spectrum of saturated hues, but also of delicately attenuated shades of many tints" (Michael Moon); "[W]hatever sex is, it might be ubiquitous in the way that weather is" (Moon, again); and "Sleep, or sleep and all its performative effects (what sleep *does*), is about a kind of sleepy recognition that can happen in a realm of soft emotion and 'fair imperfect shade'" (Jose Esteban Munoz). "After sex," it seems, queerness can be thought outside the contours of individual bodies and well beyond the parameters of discernible acts. Such an assertion might also help us rethink queer readings of Jewett's letters that identify a disparity in her relationship with Annie Fields at least in part on the basis of the latter's tendency in letters to express strong emotion but then turn to discuss the weather. (See Love, SA 326-327.) Such an assessment understands Fields's turn to the weather as a gesture of deflection, as the substituting of an impersonal environmental state for the gesture of reciprocal longing that apparently would have better satisfied Jewett. However, I would like to suggest that the turn to the weather – like a turn to any number of other "background" environmental states – may in fact be understood as something other than a displacement of interpersonal emotion. Indeed, throughout the literature of this project, intimacy is both linked to and metaphorized as a kind of meteorological condition. And so Fields's gesture in the letter – like the turn to the sound of the sea at the end of so many of *Pointed Firs*'s chapters, like Thoreau's alignment of true

Or, in C.S. Lewis's words, from his magisterial *A Grief Observed*: "[H's] absence is no more emphatic in [places that were meaningful to us] than anywhere else. It's not local at all.... The act of living is different all though. Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything."⁵⁷

Elegiac Travelogue; or, the Art of Suspension, the Art of Drift

And perhaps Lewis's words begin to gesture, too, toward the oddity of Thoreau's travelogue, which more often than not is "not local at all." If this privileging of mediation, remoteness, and the indirect seemed (or seems, still?) counterintuitive in the face of the redemptive and consolatory aims of elegy, it runs no less counter to the customary dictates of the travelogue, which, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, is "[a]n account of one's travels: a book, article, or film recording places visited and people encountered."⁵⁸ As even this most minimal of definitions begins to indicate, we expect the subject of our travelogues to be direct encounters, and we (once again) expect their literary aims to be preservationist, "recording" on the page experiences defined primarily by temporariness. We expect the itinerancy of the journey to be granted order by an identifiable itinerary, and expect the literary account to follow a similarly traceable course, where events unfold along with the days, and new reflections accompany the appearance of new locales. But Thoreau's book, as this discussion has already indicated, is more concerned with the medial than it is with immediacy, is as concerned with what isn't present as with what is. The oddity of his travelogue, I want to argue, stems from and is shaped by its generic encounter with the elegy; what results is an elegiac travelogue, one

friendship with evanescent weather states – might come to constitute not a refusal but instead a radically new understanding of relation. What if we see Fields's turn to the weather, in other words, as a shift not from emotion to neutrality, or from warmth to indifference, but instead from the performance of affection to an engagement with that affection's very modes of emergence and persistence alike?

⁵⁷ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber, 1961). Hereafter cited in the text.

⁵⁸ "Travelogue," *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, ed. Chris Baldick (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2008), 340.

concerned less with moving toward a destination than with recording the passage of time, one invested less in immediate experience than in the often insurmountable distances that separate us from any given object (or person) on whom we set our sights. (What does it mean, we might ask ourselves, to travel companioned by one who is gone?⁵⁹)

⁵⁹ Although I have cut my (direct) discussion of siblinghood from this chapter, it may be worth pointing out, however briefly, that the fact that Thoreau's primary relationship – and primary emotional allegiance – is to his brother already makes charting any course into the future a complicated endeavor. The sibling bond is insistently horizontal; like the river narrative in which it obliquely features and like the boat in which the brothers row upstream and back down, its progress is more sideways than linear. Queer and cultural critics have begun to advocate lateral bonds as an important alternate model of relation; such attention, however, has existed more in the realm of question and suggestion than active engagement. In "The Right to Be Lonely," Riley asks why we act "as if the bonds of friendship, often more enduring than the bonds of marriage, are not enough and as if the stronger affinities must always be felt to run downward to our descendants, and not laterally"; in her book *Siblings: Sex and Violence*, the psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell similarly wonders:

Why have we not considered that lateral relations in love and sexuality or in hate and war have needed a theoretical paradigm with which we might analyse, consider and seek to influence them? I am not sure of the answer to this question; I am sure we need a paradigm shift from the near-exclusive dominance of vertical comprehension to the interaction of the horizontal and the vertical in our social and in our psychological understanding. Why should there be only one set of relationships which provide for the structure of our mind, or why should one be dominant in all times and places? Even if there will be fewer full siblings in the world, there will still be lateral relationships – those relationships which take place on a horizontal axis starting with siblings, going on to peers and affinal kin. (1-2)

Those who make the study of siblings a priority often justify their case (as does Riley) by asserting that lateral bonds are an unparalleled source of durability and continuity; Mitchell, for instance, reflects on how a friend once commented to her that siblings, unlike parents and children, will "'know each other all their lives'" (x); likewise, literary critic Valerie Sanders asserts that "[t]he relationship between brother and sister is generally one of the longest we experience. Unlike the marital relationship, it spans both childhood and adulthood; it survives long periods of separation; and it cannot be broken by legal intervention. The connection persists, whether or not it is actively sought: in fact for most children it is the first relationship with someone of their own generation." And historian C. Dallett Hemphill opens her history of siblings by reflecting how Benjamin Franklin's letters to his sister Jane "became the longest correspondence of this prolific man. While they each had formed their own families, the solidity of their relationship as a bridge between the nuclear family of their birth and those of their making was unshaken. Indeed, when Ben died, Jane's nieces and nephews were unable, despite their best efforts, to console her. She had lost the sustaining link between her past, present, and future" (3). But as Thoreau's case – like Hemphill's own example – demonstrates, durability can be fleeting; sibling relationships are often the site of particularly painful loss. They can as quickly become the realm in which temporal continuity is disturbed as they can remain a realm of endurance; if the death of a child disturbs – as in Riley's account – because one is not supposed to outlive one's own offspring, then the death of a brother disturbs because it seems that one could all too easily have taken his place, because it throws into relief the surviving sibling's mortality. Indeed, one of the most famous siblings in all of literary history is known not because of how she related to her brother in life but rather for how she honored and related to him in death. I am

Indeed, although it is technically a book with a destination, *A Week* more often than not seems a text whose predominant mode is suspension, whose practice of choice is making us wait. And although it is technically a book concerned with movement (along currents, across state borders, through history, from one day to the next), *A Week* too more often than not seems a text whose practice of choice is sitting (on the seat of a boat, in a reverie) and making us sit. If *Walden* is startling for being a book of retreat preoccupied with relation, then *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* is startling for being a travelogue of a river journey which more often than not loses its geographical and chronological course. For the narrative framework of the book – chapters named after days, “plot” tracing a river voyage, passages marking sunsets and towns and dams and interlocutors on shore – seems necessary not because it is the focus of Thoreau’s attention, but because we know how to make it the focus of our own. As is true of the cloistered city-dweller in the parlor who does not even know the names of birds to envision, let alone how to track their bodies with his gaze, there are experiential limits to our ability to read. We follow Thoreau on his philosophical digressions (those digressions themselves, of course, becoming a form of distance or deflection or mediation) but cannot quite track his progress through them, find ourselves thoroughly unable to predict what might come next. But the journey itself conforms to forms we know. After Tuesday comes Wednesday. After Nashua comes Litchfield on the journey upstream. After Litchfield comes Nashua on the journey back down. Thoreau’s river is important for our determination to track it, for the ways in which it gets

speaking, of course, of Antigone, that model for ethical mourning to whom Thoreau himself turns in *A Week*. It is perhaps no coincidence that the lines that Thoreau cites from Sophocles’ play attend to Antigone’s willingness to join Polyneices in the world of the dead: “I will bury him. It is glorious for me doing this to die. I beloved will lie with him beloved, having, like a criminal, done what is holy; since the time is longer which it is necessary for me to please those below, than those here, for there I shall always lie” (107). For more on Thoreau’s willingness to lie with his own brother in his deadness, see the final sections of this chapter.

relinquished, for the readiness with which we embrace its return, for the startling ease with which it is lost again. Thoreau's river is important for the way in which we know how to wait for it, and for its persistence in making us wait. But slowly, somehow, and surely at different points for different readers (Thursday for some; Friday for some; still later, perhaps, for others) we stop waiting for what we thought was the object of our patience. We stop thinking of the river narrative as our goal. What happens, Thoreau seems to ask, when we keep *waiting* but stop *waiting for*?

Waiting, in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, is less a form of anticipation than it is a form of persistence. Waiting, that is to say, is as much a mode of being as it is the instrumental precursor to something else. Although Peck reads *A Week*'s commitment to human constructions of time as a narrative choice that fixes Thoreau's experience with his brother in the human record and brings temporality to the fore as the book's central theme,⁶⁰ I am more interested in understanding the predictability of the week not as the anchor to which Thoreau (and his readers) constantly return (one form of solace amidst grief and disorientation, that is to say, being the predictable way that Tuesday will become Wednesday will become Thursday), but rather as the structure that gives structure to *how and what there is to lose* – even if, or perhaps especially if, what there is to lose is an understanding of time as teleological or instrumental in its very form. Time becomes not a linear space to move through, but rather a thickness – an atmosphere, a hue – in which we sit, in which we feel our losses, which gives shape to those losses themselves. (This feeling of suspension becomes all the more acute when we acknowledge that *A Week*, which T.S. McMillin has deemed “palindromic” in structure, technically evades destination, ending precisely where it began, and erasing from its pages any detailed account of

⁶⁰ See *Thoreau's Morning Work*, pp.9-10.

the ascent of Agiocochook, which formed the heart and highlight of the historical journey itself.⁶¹)

This suspended temporality is hardly unique to Thoreau; rather, its appearance here seems to tie *A Week* to many of the most memorable modern accounts of grief. And so perhaps we can say that Thoreau's is the temporality of the newly objectless, of one who finds himself unmoored from a usual geography of interpersonal connection. After opening *A Grief Observed* with the taut observation that "No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear" (19), Lewis later returns to the trope: "And grief still feels like fear. Perhaps, more strictly, like suspense. Or like waiting, just hanging about waiting for something to happen. It gives life a permanently provisional feeling..... Up till this I always had too little time. Now there is nothing but time. Almost pure time, empty successiveness" (50). And Riley's entire essay is about this phenomenon; as she explains by way of an opening, "I'll not be writing about death, but about an altered condition of life. The experience that not only preoccupied but occupied me was of living in suddenly arrested time: that acute sense of being cut off from any temporal flow that can grip you after the sudden death of your child." And, later in her essay, she quotes from a journal entry penned "*ten months after*" her son's sudden death (temporal markers, once again, existing only to provide the sense of anchoring that the account itself undoes):

No tenses any more. Among the recent labels here is 'time dilation', referring to our temporal perception's elasticity, its capacity to be baggy...A sudden death, for the one left behind, does such violence to the experienced 'flow' of time that it stops, and then slowly wells up into a large pool. Instead of the old line of forward time, now something like a globe holds you. You live inside a great circle with no rim. In the past, before J's idiotic disappearance, the future lay in front of me as if I could lean into it gently like a finger of land, a promontory feeling its way into the sea.

⁶¹ T.S. McMillin, *The Meaning of Rivers: Flow and Reflection in American Literature* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2011), 156ff.

Thoreau, of course, journaled too, and while he stuck to the calendar dates rather than tethering his words to the days or weeks or months that had passed since his brother's death, his sense of the time is no less altered in the wake of death than is Riley's. On February 21, 1842, 41 days after John's death, he reflected: "I am a feather floating in the atmosphere; on every side is depth unfathomable. I feel as if years had been crowded into the last month, and yet the regularity of what we call time has been so far preserved as that I... [two lines missing from the manuscript]... will be welcome in the present. I have lived ill for the most part because too near myself. I have tripped myself up, so that there was no progress for my own narrowness. I cannot walk conveniently and pleasantly but when I hold myself far off in the horizon."

Such accounts may in fact return us, if obliquely, to the Concord and Merrimack Rivers (the one stagnant and still, the other known for its vigorous current); our privileged metaphor for the "normal" movement of time is, of course (as the excerpts above indicate), that of "flow."⁶² In his reading of *A Week* in *The Meaning of Rivers: Flow and Reflection in American Literature*,

⁶² When I first read Riley's comments above (about "a promontory feeling its way to sea"), I was immediately reminded once again of Dickinson's remarkable 1862 poem "It was not Death –," which meditates on the experience of an emotion identified only as "It." I have always understood this nameless (and seemingly unnamable) emotion to dwell on the cusp of (but to not quite be) depression; reading Thoreau, however, has caused me to wonder whether it might more resemble the dullness that follows acute grief. The final two stanzas seem especially apt here, not only on their own terms but also for how they echo (or are echoed by) Riley's: "When everything that ticked – has stopped – /And Space stares all around –/Or Grisly frosts – first Autumn morns,/Repeal the Beating Ground – //But, most, like Chaos – stopless – cool – /Without a Chance, or Spar – /Or even a Report of Land/To justify – Despair." Where Dickinson casts this emotion (and its accompanying somatic experiences) as akin to the feeling of being lost at sea, contemporary writers, too, turn to literal images of water (and its flow) to articulate their sense of time's passing (or failure to pass) in the wake of death. Elsewhere in her essay, Riley reflects: "You watch the water cascading from the tap to splash into the basin. Yet noting small events and their effects doesn't revive your former impression of moving inside time. The tap turns, the water pours. You observe sequence. Nothing, though, follows from this observation to propel you, too, onward into the old world of consequence." And Marie Howe's remarkable elegy for her own brother, "What the Living Do," begins with a startling apostrophe and a scene of non-flow before segueing into a description of atmospheric conditions in the face of which there is seemingly nothing to do but endure: "Johnny, the kitchen sink has been clogged for days, some utensil probably/fell down there./And the Drano won't work but smells dangerous, and the crusty dishes/have piled up//waiting for the plumber I still haven't called. This is the everyday we/spoke of./It's winter again: the sky's a deep headstrong blue, and the sunlight/pours through//the open living room windows because the heat's on too high in here, and/I can't turn it off."

McMillin argues that “the river itself [by which he actually means both the “physical Concord and the Conceptual Concord”] is the source of reflections and a living lesson in flow” (170). But the Concord, that stream upon which the journey both begins and ends, and on whose surfaces so many readers see Thoreau finding recovery and redemption, is (as McMillin himself acknowledges in passing) a dead river, a body of water whose current is barely perceptible.⁶³ And so *A Week* – like the accounts of grief outlined above – becomes a lesson in what to do in the absence of flow, in what to do when current – like time – eddies or pools. The final sentence of the “Concord River” preface (itself importantly out of time, insofar as it is not incorporated into the week’s schedule that governs the rest of the book) is simultaneously a statement of purpose and a gesture of passivity: “at last I resolved to launch myself on [the Concord’s] bosom and float whither it would bear me” (13).⁶⁴

⁶³ For more on the topography of the Concord, see not only Thoreau’s “Concord River” preface, but also Laurence Eaton Richardson, *Concord River* (Barre, MA: Barre Publishers, 1964).

⁶⁴ The question of drift in *A Week* is also a question of surfaces, and of the importance of surfaces in Thoreau’s descriptions of his journey. If *Walden* is at least in part a book about sounding depths – including, famously, several lengthy meditations on proving false the myth of the pond’s bottomlessness – then we might take *A Week* to be at least in part a book about navigating surfaces and gently sounding shallows. On Sunday, he reflects: “It required some rudeness to disturb with our boat the mirror-like surface of the water, in which every twig and blade of grass was so faithfully reflected; too faithfully indeed for art to imitate, for only Nature may exaggerate herself. The shallowest still water is unfathomable. Wherever the trees and skies are reflected, there is more than Atlantic depth, and no danger of fancy running aground. We notice that it required a separate intention of the eye, a more free and abstracted vision, to see the reflected trees and the sky, than to see the river bottom merely; and so are there manifold visions in the direction of every object, and even the most opaque reflect the heavens from their surface” (39). What does it mean, then, to see the surface, to look *at* rather than *through*? For as Thoreau points out, we too easily see through the surface to the shallow bottom, and, if we manage to abstract our vision and stop the penetrative impulse of our gaze, we cannot avoid seeing the reflection of the trees and the sky. This may seem particular to waterscapes, but the final line puts the lie to this. For “even the most opaque [objects] reflect the heavens from their surface.” Surfaces, like shallows, are never simple. Images redouble; sounds and sights echo. After all, the shallowest still water is unfathomable, in both senses of the term. I am interested in this complexity for two main reasons: First, for how the rhetoric of surfaces has become central to a model of reading advocated by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus (among others). In the meditation on “surface reading” in their introduction to a special issue of *Representations* on the topic, the two critics reflect: “Following the lead of our contributors, we take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A

In his journal on March 11, 1842, two months after John's death, Thoreau similarly reflected: "I must receive my life as passively as the willow leaf that flutters over the brook.... I will wait the breezes patiently, and grow as Nature shall determine. My fate cannot be grand so. We may live the life of a plant or an animal, without living an animal life. This constant and universal consent of the animal comes of resting quietly in God's palm. I feel as if [I] could at

surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*" (9). Based on Best's and Marcus's definitions, my chapter likely could be classified as a work of surface reading, a model that has clear affinities to Sedgwick's reparative reading, a practice of which I have long been fond (and to which I will return at some length in my conclusion). However, I am interested in the way in which Thoreau's meditation on the relationship between surface and depth, between looking at and seeing through, may productively complicate Best's and Marcus's terms. And in surface reading, in its resistance to hidden depths, "highlights something true and visible on the text's surface that symptomatic reading had ironically rendered invisible" (12), what happens when what is visible on the surface *is* invisibility? What if in suggesting that "what [Thoreau's] text means lies in what it does not say" (the stance, for Best and Marcus, of the symptomatic reader), we are not enforcing an imperative to plumb hidden depths, but rather granting importance to the way in which the text foregrounds the unsaid (the anonymous, the absent) *as such*? In other words: what happens when absence itself is on the surface, and absence itself – not the (repressed) presences that it obliquely indexes – is what we need to learn to read?

Second, I wonder – a line of thought I don't have time to responsibly pursue at this point – whether a different attention to the relationship between surfaces and grief might return us to and allow us to reread another Transcendentalist writer's anonymous elegy. I am speaking here of Emerson's "Experience," written at least in part (if not primarily) as a response to the death of his son, Waldo, mere weeks after John Thoreau's. Near the beginning of the essay, Emerson writes:

The only thing grief has taught me, is to know how shallow it is. That, like all the rest, plays about the surface, and never introduces me into the reality, for contact with which, we would even pay the costly price of sons and lovers.... In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate, — no more. I cannot get it nearer to me. If tomorrow I should be informed of the bankruptcy of my principal debtors, the loss of my property would be a great inconvenience to me, perhaps, for many years; but it would leave me as it found me, — neither better nor worse. So is it with this calamity: it does not touch me: some thing which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar. It was caducous. I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature. (256)

This passage – like the essay as a whole – is controversial precisely because of what it seems to deny about the depth, the significance, and the affective reality of death – precisely because, in other words, "the only thing grief has taught [Emerson]...is to know how shallow it is. That [it], like all the rest, plays about the surface." Readings of "Experience," not surprisingly, have sought to find traces of the more recognizably elegiac in Emerson's lines, have sought to locate Waldo (or the significance of his death) amidst his apparent absence. (The most famous [and most nuanced] of such works is Sharon Cameron's remarkable 1986 essay "Representing Grief: Emerson's 'Experience.'") But I wonder if rethinking the capacities of shallowness and surfaces might facilitate a surface reading of Emerson that allows us to take him at his word without (as has been true of many a reader) being appalled by it.

any time resign my life and the responsibility of living into God's hands, and become as innocent, free from care, as a plant or stone." These may read as little other than the nihilistic words of a grief-stricken brother. And perhaps they are that, at least in part. But in the context of *A Week*, in the context of the work I've read on mourning and grief, and in the context of the losses I've lived, I can't help but see more in these lines. I can't help but see a gentle rethinking of agency, of vitality, of humanness, can't help but see a man thinking through – and later enacting – what it might mean to live in a state of suspension, somewhere between the living and the dead, somewhere between the contours of human agency and a devivified realm. Indeed, *A Week* maintains the notion that patience is a state that somehow removes us from the realm of the human, that is divorced, somehow, from our customary sense of the agential. For the only beings in *A Week* who are credited with the patience that Thoreau so highly values are exclusively nonhuman: a mastiff, a kingfisher, a hundred yoke of oxen; fishes and cows; a pine; the sun itself.⁶⁵

And perhaps Thoreau himself is, in *A Week*, somehow more pine than man.⁶⁶ To account for such a claim we might return to the grammatical paradigms with which I began, and to the way in which Henry remains tethered to John throughout the book. All we know of either brother emerges through the brief discussions of behavior attributed to those insistently relational – and insistently inseparable – pronouns or descriptors: the one and the other; the voyageur and his companion; the one and his brother; we. Robinson has taken this rhetorical technique to be

⁶⁵ We may recall here that in "Nutting," it is "the shady nook/Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower,/Deformed and sullied" that "*patiently* gave up/Their quiet being."

⁶⁶ This claim might tie *A Week* in unexpected ways to work being done across the arts and humanities in relation to the "nonhuman turn." This loosely defined field, which draws from (among other areas) affect theory, animal studies, the new materialism, and systems theory, tends to prioritize new media/digital objects of study, but may benefit from an expanded relationship to literary objects and modes. (See, for instance, the schedule for the "Nonhuman Turn" conference sponsored by the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee's Center for 21st Century Studies in May of 2012.)

Thoreau's way of revivifying his brother; in his account, Thoreau "essentially absorb[s] John's vision into himself, or, in another sense, give[s] John new life through his own eyes" (60). Likewise, Johnson argues that the first person plural means that "John thus remains a living presence, taking his place by Thoreau's side during the excursion, and, as his muse, during the writing of *A Week*" (52). But in a book that so privileges distance and remoteness, that is insistently non-monumental, that concerns itself more with bones than with men and more with silence than with talk, it seems equally (if not more) likely that in tying himself to John in this way, Thoreau is in fact devivifying himself.⁶⁷ (Here, I agree with John Russell Lowell's words, if not his broader sentiments; over the course of the book, Henry Thoreau does indeed disappear from the bow-oar – if he can be said ever to have appeared there at all.) The book as a whole poses a question that it is perhaps not prepared to answer: when we companion (or are companioned by) the dead, how alive in fact are we?

I do not mean such a question to seem purely speculative, but instead to extend the questions of agency and liveness that *A Week* implicitly raises. For confronting death and loss, in Thoreau's account, is a fundamentally alienating experience, one that puts the mourner into intimate contact with the other-than-human world and, also, with his own other-than-humanness. On February 21, 1842, following 40 days of silence in the wake of John's death, Thoreau returned to his journal. "I must confess there is nothing so strange to me as my own body," that first entry began. Death, it seems, had become a Ktaadn, that imposing mountain in Maine about whose summit (reached in 1846) Thoreau would reflect:

⁶⁷ Morton suggests – entirely speculatively, and without explanation – that the "mesh" of queer ecology's life-forms "constitute...an open-ended concatenation of interrelations that blur and confound boundaries at any level," including "between the living and the nonliving" (QE 275). Although the examples in his piece are far more likely to be viruses than literary works, *A Week* might constitute one unlikely instantiation of this blurring.

I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one, - that my body might, - but I fear bodies. I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature, - daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, - rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The solid earth! The actual world! The common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we? (525)

Or perhaps Ktaadn – even in its immediacy, even in the intensity of its *Contact!* – had become a reminder of the distances and absences that death precipitates; on the mountain, after all, Thoreau “fear[s] bodies” but is himself a “ghost.” As Linck C. Johnson reminds us, *Walden* was not the only document written at the same time as *A Week*; in that cabin at Walden pond, Thoreau also drafted “Ktaadn, and the Maine Woods.” Companion volumes, all.

This turn to devivification marks the final step in this chapter’s attempt to rethink the relational capacities of deadness itself, suggesting that *A Week* constitutes an attempt not only to think through how death can be the ground of relation, but also to envision how a surviving brother might productively (and relationally) adopt the guise of deadness himself. For Thoreau’s waiting on the river (and our waiting on or with his prose) comes to feel like a version of the waiting on/waiting with death that Sedgwick discusses in “Pedagogy of Buddhism”:

Thus the instructions for dying are actually the same as the instructions for working with the dying. Both teaching and learning in this situation involve the most passive and minimal of performances. ‘Opening to’ (a person or predicament), ‘opening around’ or ‘softening around’ (a site of pain), *listening*, relaxation, spaciousness, patience in the sense of *pateor* or lying open, shared breathing: these practices of nondoing, some of them sounding hardly more than New Age commonplaces, seem able to support a magnetic sense of the real far into the threshold of extinguished identities.... And it’s a surprise, though it shouldn’t be, that a nondoing verging on extinction would be the condition of possibility for *companionship* in these realms of unmaking.⁶⁸

The kind of objectless waiting to which both Thoreau and Sedgwick, like Tilley, give us access gains its importance not only from its radical immanence, but also from the way in which it

⁶⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Pedagogy of Buddhism,” *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performance* (Durham & London: Duke U P, 2003), 175.

straddles the threshold of the living and the dead, the doing and the nondoining, the active and the passive. For if John Thoreau in *A Week* is suspended between the world of the living and the world of the dead, depicted as a living companion while also being understood as the companion who *will have died*, then Henry David Thoreau finds a way to suspend himself there too. Where many a critic (Thoreau's contemporaries, my own contemporaries, those who wrote in the many years in between) have viewed *A Week's* drift – its radical absence of direction – to indicate a lack of writerly skill, I read it instead as being akin to the “most passive and minimal of performances” to which Sedgwick refers, and upon which companionship itself can be built. Like the friend's capacity to “[open] around” the dying, and like Matthiessen's account of nature “waiting around” the ailing Jewett, Thoreau's prose moves less *toward* than *around*, eschewing both linear progress and a willful performance of agency just as it eschews explicit mention of John himself.

Coda

Twenty years after John's death, Thoreau's life itself came to an end. While on his deathbed, facing his own horizon, Thoreau was asked how the future seemed to him. “Just as uninteresting as ever,” came his characteristically pithy reply.⁶⁹ And yet once again, as is so often the case with Thoreau, even apparent absences bear their own complexity. For as in *A Week*, where lakes invisible from a mountaintop are characterized as “equally unobserved” (282), suggesting that there may be as many ways of not seeing as there are of seeing, the wry comparison that frames Thoreau's utterance (“just as...as ever”) implies that the future may, at different moments, or from different prospects, be variously uninteresting. Not, importantly, that

⁶⁹ Cited in Richardson, 388.

we might vacillate between interest and disinterest, but rather that disinterest itself – like lostness, like stillness, like anonymity, like remoteness – might be a complicated realm to wander through, might be a terrain of investment all its own.

The terrain of Thoreau's own future, it turned out, was not just a room in Concord, sunlight streaming through a window, but also once again the currents of the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. For as he lay still, falling farther into the clutches of the tuberculosis that soon would take his life, his sister Sophia read to him from *A Week*, his greatest professional failure and an index of his greatest personal pain. And so as the end approached, Thoreau heard his own voice spoken back to him, heard of dreams and strangers and ruins, of shad that patiently wait for a dam to disappear and a lost ecosystem to return. Of his unnamed brother, who sat by his side on those Massachusetts rivers and whose trip across the River Styx, deep into the unknowable, preceded his own.

Or, in John Dolis's infinitely more evocative words: "May 6, 1862: one final irony: a sunny day in spring: it's morning: Thoreau smells a bouquet of hyacinths – his breathing shallow now, not unlike the Concord or the Merrimack to which his mind, it seems, steals one more backward glance. Sophia reads to him a passage from *A Week*. Thoreau is set adrift."⁷⁰

⁷⁰ John Dolis, *Tracking Thoreau: Double-Crossing Nature and Technology* (Cranbury, NJ: Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp., 2005), 200.

CHAPTER THREE: SPINSTER ECOLOGY: RACHEL CARSON AND THE PROBLEM OF QUEER FUTURITY

Non-Reproductive Futurity; or, Moving Avuncularly

As we now find ourselves moving once again toward the future (albeit in a characteristically indirect way), we might return to Ezra Taft Benson's perplexity over the fact that "a spinster with no children was so concerned about genetics."¹ For Benson's attack, its misogyny at best thinly veiled, makes legible one of the central challenges to developing a queer ecocritical practice: the status of futurity. As my introduction established, mainstream environmentalism is as deeply invested in (normative, linear) futurity as recent queer theory is resistant to it. And so how can we envision a mode of (queer) environmental futurity separated from the imperative of biological reproduction, or outside the scale provided by "future generations"? Or, to put these questions another way, one that makes the seemingly irreconcilable tensions between the two camps legible, what possibly constitutes a sustainable "no future"?

Ironically, the belief that queer subjectivity somehow precludes an investment in futurity undergirds not only Benson's dismissal of Carson but also much recent work in queer theory. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, one of the most influential texts in queer theory's antisocial turn, Edelman argues that politics is predicated on a reproductive futurism embodied by the figure of the child, a fact that "preserv[es] ... the absolute privilege of heteronormativity" (2) and leaves the queer structurally outside the bounds of both politics and social belonging. Queerness, for Edelman, thus not only "names the side of those *not* 'fighting for the children,'

¹ A version of this chapter was published as "Spinster Ecology: Rachel Carson, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Nonreproductive Futurity" in *American Literature*, volume 84, issue 2, pp 409-435. Copyright 2012, Duke University Press. All rights reserved. Used by permission of the publisher.

the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism,” but also “attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place, accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social” (3). The queer, in other words, “comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity” (4).

Although Edelman makes the boldest – and most polemical – case for a queer no-futurity, he is hardly alone in his skepticism about the promise of the future as such. Love similarly describes her project in *Feeling Backward* as an attempt “to resist the affirmative turn in queer studies in order to dwell at length on the ‘dark side’ of modern queer representation” (4). Whereas “contemporary gay, lesbian, and queer critics tend to see queer subjects during [the modernist] period as isolated and longing for a future community,” she instead focuses on texts that “turn their backs on the future: they choose isolation, turn toward the past, or choose to live in a present disconnected from any larger historical continuum” (8). Love’s work advocates another kind of “no future”: rather than insisting that we actively refuse the tyranny of reproductive futurism, she suggests that many queer literary figures already have made (or been forced to make) that choice for themselves— and, by extension, for us. It then becomes our task as readers to consider the affective resonance of the temporal backwardness that such literary figures both embody and perform. If Edelman advocates the *act* of rejection, in other words, Love explores the *feeling* of the backward queer subject having-(been-)rejected. Whereas affirmative (and pride-based) queer politics look to the future as an ever-beckoning space of promise, Love is ultimately as skeptical of that anticipatory orientation as Edelman is of the liberal inclusion model that often accompanies it. If she doesn’t go so far as to reject politics or the future themselves – indeed, she expresses some concern that “it is ... hard to see how feelings like bitterness or self-hatred might contribute to any recognizable political praxis” (4) -

she insists on retaining the backwardness of the shamed or otherwise injured queer subject: not only because “the idea of modernity – with its suggestions of progress, rationality, and technological advance – is intimately bound up with backwardness” (5) but also because “the history of queer damage retains its capacity to do harm in the present” (9). If she doesn’t outright deny the possibility of a queer future, then, she suggests that it can be approached only with an injured back turned.

And so it seems safe to say that *No Future* – Edelman’s book itself, or the stance toward temporality that it shares with much recent queer theory – might be the last place an environmentalist would look for inspiration. (Indeed, we can envision *No Future* being the title of a work of apocalyptic environmentalism – its foundational negation serving as a chastening warning, not a battle cry or siren song.) And yet, although eco-futurists undoubtedly would earn Edelman’s scorn, their treatment of futurity can in fact illuminate something about the nature of his own. For despite their differences of opinion, these two camps share a fundamental understanding of just what the future is and entails, just where it stands relative to those of us staring it down, with either desire or animosity in our eyes. The antisocial theorist’s rejection of futurity is, I would argue, ultimately no more radical and no less normative than is the wholehearted promotion of child-rearing – in large part because it continues to concretize and externalize the future, to treat it as the grammatical object of our transitive acts. When Edelman says “fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital ls and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop” (29), he posits metonyms for the future as objects *out there*. Both queer theory and contemporary environmentalist rhetoric agree how the future appears – legibly, at some point

down the road, able to be recognized and harnessed and seized. Vehement rejection is ultimately no less invested in futurity than is the process of wholehearted embrace. Whether the future arrives in the form of a swaddled newborn or is structurally rejected through the annihilating stance of a radical queer seems ultimately to change little about (and do little for) our understanding of that future itself.

And yet perhaps Edelman can yield some productive language toward our rethinking of a queer environmental future, even if his mode remains anathema to environmentalism's practitioners. In the final sentence of his introduction, Edelman suggests that "what is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us is this willingness to insist intransitively – to insist that the future stop here" (31). He locates queerness's intransitivity in its affiliation with the death drive – which, as he says earlier, "can only insist, and every end toward which we mistakenly interpret its insistence to pertain is a sort of grammatical placeholder, one that tempts us to read as transitive a pulsion that attains through insistence alone the satisfaction no end ever holds" (22). Edelman wants to figure queerness as intransitive in the face of a reproductive futurism that is insistently transitive; whereas the heteronormative regime insists that the future will arrive, straightforwardly and uninterruptedly, the queer keeps the verb from meeting its object, turns a transitive quest for fruition or validation into an insistently intransitive pulsion. And so too, for Edelman, queerness becomes intransitive to the extent to which queers embrace the fact that their own sexuality is non-reproductive, cannot depend on a product or an object to legitimate it or make it mean. However, a problem emerges insofar as Edelman's intransitivity becomes negation. Just as his syntax slips from the proclaimed intransitivity of "insists intransitively" to the more directed, if not overtly transitive, formulation "insists that," his

definition of queer objectlessness slips from the queer's identification with the death drive into the queer's overtly transitive negation of the future as object.

This trend toward transitivity matters, too, for how we read the foundational “no” of the book's title – and how we understand transitive negation to be functioning at the expense of a potentially intransitive negativity. Near the beginning of his introduction, Edelman implies that his titular “no” may be akin to “figuratively ... cast[ing] our vote for ‘none of the above’” (5), a formulation that seemingly strives to make the word not a directed act but rather a gesture of evasion – one that would allow “the future” to persist while positioning the queer subject in an askance relation to it. Throughout Edelman's introduction, however, the negativity both embodied and figured by queerness shifts repeatedly into an oppositional act of negation, one predicated on hypostasizing (for the sake of rejecting) the future as object. The “none of the above” sentence itself continues in such a way as to reveal this slippage. As Edelman writes: “We might rather, figuratively, cast our vote for ‘none of the above,’ for the primacy of a constant *no* in response to the law of the Symbolic, which would echo that law's foundational act, its self-constituting negation” (5). Across these clauses, we move from a no that indicates separateness to a no that signifies rejection to a no that constitutes negation. Once again, transitivity and object-orientedness seem to bear a kind of gravitational pull within Edelman's argument.

Indeed, maintaining intransitivity seems untenable given Edelman's choice to write in the polemic form, which is predicated on taking a stance *against* an existing object or position. The structural transitivity of the polemic makes it impossible for him to maintain in his mode of argumentation what he promotes philosophically. Whereas Edelman decries the “demand to translate the insistence, the pulsive *force*, of negativity into some determinate stance or

‘position’” (4), his own writing succumbs to a similar demand at the level of its rhetoric. For example, although he emphasizes the non-teleological, pulsive potential of queerness by arguing that it is “intent on the end, not the ends, of the social” (28), he cannot maintain this intent rhetorically. The “end” that Edelman proposes in place of the teleological “ends” of reproductive futurism is brought about through insistently transitive acts of negation, rejection, and refusal.²

I would like to suggest instead that a queer environmentalism might become positively intransitive not because of its willingness (or structural mandate) to reject the future but instead because of how the future appears to a queer subject considering it outside the bounds of biological reproduction. What if the queer relationship to futurity is intransitive not because of how it refuses but rather because of how it facilitates a notion of the future (and of futurity) outside the realm of objects, outside the push and pull of acceptance or refusal, both outside and beyond our capacity to control? And so perhaps the question is not the future, yes or no, but the future, which and whose, where and when and how.

It is here that a return to the figure of the spinster may be apt, insofar as she challenges the customary notions of futurity that entrap both Edelman and the environmentalists. For the spinster (or “old maid”), as we have seen, dwells in an irrevocably awkward relationship to the normative unfolding of time. In the context of an environmentalism whose futurity is predicated

² I point this out less to critique Edelman than to consider a rhetorical and generic possibility that his argument invites even as his rhetoric denies. What would happen if we forestalled the slippage between *insist* and *insist that*? What if we wrote in a mode that “insists intransitively”? Although there is not room in this essay to fully elaborate such possibilities, I’d like to suggest that rethinking futurity (in large part through expanding the kinds of texts we examine, and the practices of reading we engage) might also force us to rethink the efficacy or desirability of the polemic itself, a genre traditionally as important to ecocriticism’s and environmentalism’s own politicized approach as it has been to queer theory’s (anti)political thrust. As Garrard has written, “ecocriticism is...an avowedly political mode of analysis” (*Ecocriticism* [London: Routledge, 2004], 3), a fact that Buell takes to have generic and rhetorical implications: “Environmental criticism, even when constrained by academic protocols, is usually energized by environmental concern. Often it is openly polemical” (*The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* [Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005], 97).

on reproduction (the same understanding of futurity upon which Edelman's critique depends), how does the spinster reach her future? And how might the complicated answers to such a question begin to help us understand not simply a different stance *toward* the future (one outside the push and pull of wholehearted, teleological anticipation or outright rejection) but a different understanding of that future itself?

The life and work of Rachel Carson perhaps give us a place to begin – for Ezra Taft Benson was at least partially correct: the author of *Silent Spring* was, definitionally speaking, a spinster. Never married, she spent her life in a series of deeply invested but oblique relationships to the world around her: she was an academic scientist without a doctorate or a university appointment. She was a biologist in an era of nuclear physics. She was a creative writer invested in scientific precision. She was a committed partner in the romantic friendship that she shared with Dorothy Freeman, a married mother of one with whom she exchanged thousands of passionate letters (and many fewer, but no less passionate, visits) between 1952 and 1964. She was herself surrogate mother to her grandnephew, Roger Christie, whom she adopted at the age of five when his own mother, her niece, died young.³ When a *Baltimore Sun* reporter asked in 1962 about her spinster status, Carson responded simply that she had never married because she had “no time.”⁴

But Rachel Carson, who claimed to have no time, became in *Silent Spring* a philosopher of the present and the future and how both become legible within the natural world. And her book, often cited as a foundational text for the modern environmental movement, consequently

³ Linda Lear posits the first two obliquities in my list in her introduction to the fortieth-anniversary edition of *Silent Spring* (1962; reprint, New York: Mariner Books, 2002, xi and xvii). The rest of this paragraph's portrait of Carson is informed by Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* (New York: Mariner Books, 2009) and *Always, Rachel: The Letters of Rachel Carson and Dorothy Freeman, 1952-1964*, ed. Martha Freeman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

⁴ Frances Lewine, “Rachel Carson Shuns Lecture Hall,” *Baltimore Sun*, 3 October 1962.

became one of the first to establish that movement's stake in the health of future generations. For *Silent Spring's* indictment of DDT came not only from what had happened and what was the case but also from what *would be*: from the accumulation of toxins invisible until they reach a threshold of legibility, from the slow dispersal of poisons across an ecosystem until they appear far from their source, making their presence felt in seemingly inexplicable ways. The book is full of apparently conventional references to a future that Edelman would perhaps dismiss as terroristic in its heteronormativity: to mother's milk, to biological reproduction, to families having the capacity – and, further, the right – to endure. Indeed, one of the darkest images or fiercest specters in the rhetoric of *Silent Spring* is the “shadow of sterility” which hangs over fields sprayed with pesticides.⁵ In this, we might say, the function of Carson's DDT sounds a lot like the role of Edelman's queer.

But is Carson's understanding of the future really as normative as such an account would make it out to be? After all, we are talking about a queer woman who herself had no future – dying of breast cancer while completing her most famous book, trying to account for what would become of her home and her writings and her adopted grandnephew and her beloved cat and Dorothy Freeman, questions of inheritance and transmission were, for Carson, tangled at best. And this was of course the case even before her own shadow – not of sterility but of mortality – fell upon her. For there are many names for the spinster's relationship to the future, none of them conventional or readily recognized as contributing to traditional sociality. Perhaps one would be avuncular: often an aunt, the spinster stands in a kind of slanted or askance relationship to the linear, vertical paradigms of transmission that govern familiar notions of futurity. (This is, of course, all the more radically true of Carson, who adopted her niece's son.)

⁵ See Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 26 & 108, for more on this “shadow of sterility.” Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

In *Tendencies*, Sedgwick takes up the potential of aunts and uncles to display possibilities for alternate relations both across and within generations:

Because aunts and uncles (in either narrow or extended meanings) are adults whose intimate access to children needn't depend on their own pairing or procreation, it's very common, of course, for some of them to have the office of representing nonconforming or nonreproductive sexualities to children.... But the space for nonconformity carved out by the avunculate goes beyond the important provision of role models for proto-gay kids.... If having grandparents means perceiving your parents as somebody's children, then having aunts and uncles, even the most conventional of aunts and uncles, means perceiving your parents as somebody's sibs – not, that is, as alternately abject and omnipotent links in a chain of compulsion and replication that leads inevitably to *you*; but rather as elements in a varied, contingent, recalcitrant but re-forming seriality, as people who demonstrably could have turned out very differently – indeed as people who, in the differing, refractive relations among their own generation, can be seen already to have done so.⁶

The spinster, not saving the planet for her own children, engages in a more impersonal mode of stewardship – one whose investment is neither linear nor directly object-based but instead, as Sedgwick suggests, somehow more “varied, contingent, recalcitrant, and reforming.” Distanced from the heteronormative paradigm often central to the rhetoric of both liberalism and environmentalism, she stands in a slanted relationship to a place and time that she will tend but will not – and cannot – directly pass on.⁷ And so the spinster, like the aunt, both displays and becomes a figure for the openness of the future – and of the present that was once understood as the future of another past. Not only does her role within the family demonstrate the extent to which one's parents could have – and, indeed, already did – turn out differently, but she also alters the simple narrative in which each of us, at our birth, marked that the future had arrived.

⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Tales of the Avunculate: Queer Tutelage in *The Importance of Being Earnest*,” in *Tendencies* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 1993), 63.

⁷ In this emphasis on the spinster's slanted relationship to normative paradigms, we might hear echoes of Foucault's comment in “Friendship as a Way of Life” that “[h]omosexuality is a historic occasion to reopen affective and relational virtualities not so much through the intrinsic qualities of the homosexual but because the ‘slantwise’ position of the latter, as it were, the diagonal lines he can lay out in the social fabric allow these virtualities to come to light” (138).

By serving as a link between the horizontal and vertical paradigms of relation that exist within any traditional family (and within many non-traditional ones as well) – by *queering* the very shape of transmission – the spinster aunt challenges the notion of the future as a readily reachable and readily identifiable realm out there, as an entity that can straightforwardly appear or arrive. Down the avuncular path, that is to say, there is no way to get directly from here to there; it leads only from one person's present to another person's future.

It is not only theoretically or biographically that this Carson of alternate, non-linear, somehow askance futurity becomes legible. For throughout *Silent Spring* itself, she posits a future far more entangled and varied than either Edelman or today's environmentalists tend to promote. There, Carson seems to suggest that the future is already strange to (or non-identical with) itself, insofar as we've been looking for it in all the wrong places and ways. In the chapter entitled "The Human Price," Carson writes a description of risk that is also an eloquent account of ecology itself:

We know that even single exposures to these chemicals, if the amount is large enough, can precipitate acute poisoning. But this is not the major problem. The sudden illness or death of farmers, pilots, and others exposed to appreciable quantities of pesticides are tragic and should not occur. For the population as a whole, we must be more concerned with the delayed effects of absorbing small amounts of the pesticides that invisibly contaminate our world.

Responsible public health officials have pointed out that the biological effects of chemicals are cumulative over long periods of time, and that the hazard to the individual may depend on the sum of the exposures received throughout his lifetime. For these reasons the danger is easily ignored. It is human nature to shrug off what may seem to us a vague threat of future disaster. "Men are naturally most impressed by diseases which have obvious manifestations," says a wise physician, Dr. René Dubos, "yet some of their worst enemies creep on them unobtrusively."

For each of us, as for the robin in Michigan or the salmon in the Miramichi, this is a problem of ecology, of interrelationships, of interdependence. We poison the caddis flies in a stream and the salmon runs dwindle and die. We poison the gnats in a lake and the poison travels from link to link of the food chain and soon the birds of the lake margins become its victims. We spray our elms and the following springs are silent of robin song, not because we sprayed the robins directly but because the poison traveled, step by step, through the now familiar elm leaf-earthworm-robin cycle. These are matters

of record, observable, part of the visible world around us. They reflect the web of life – or death – that scientists know as ecology.

But there is also an ecology of the world within our bodies. In this unseen world minute causes produce mighty effects; the effect, moreover, is often seemingly unrelated to the cause, appearing in a part of the body remote from the area where the original injury was sustained.... When one is concerned with the mysterious and wonderful functioning of the human body, cause and effect are seldom simple and easily demonstrated relationships. They may be widely separated both in space and time. (188-189)

Carson's paragraphs here become insistently intransitive; the grammar of her sentences, in other words, performs the point that "the following springs are silent of robin song, not because we sprayed the robins *directly*, but because the poison *traveled*."⁸ Although far-flung and seemingly inexplicable environmental changes, for Carson, connect back to the initial act of pesticide spraying, the intertwined and polyvalent patterns of ecology are more a matter of process and persistence than they are of direct causal links, or of a linear progression (either grammatical or biological) from subject to verb to object. As a result, ecology is made manifest in these paragraphs by the sheer preponderance of intransitive verbs: is, are, be; have pointed; are; may depend; is; creep up; become; are; are; traveled; are; was; is; are; be.

And where is the future here, amidst these verbs that persist and insist, without reaching an object or an end? It comes in the "following springs." It is "soon." It appears in "delayed effects." It arrives, tellingly, "throughout a lifetime." Cause and effect, relatedly, "may be widely separated in both space and time." The future may not only be distant from here temporally; it may also be quite a hike away – and not found down the path on which we originally set out. The present is the future of any number of pasts – some near, some far; some recent, some long gone. Indeed, Carson suggests, we are already in the future – not simply because today marks one of

⁸ This is not to suggest that transitive verbs appear nowhere within Carson's description – such a feat is unlikely within the meaning-making paradigms of English grammar. However, even when transitivity is posited, it is imminently complicated or revoked.

yesterday's possible futures, but also because the future is here well before it makes itself legible to us as such. Once we stop expecting the future to appear as the precipitate of acts we can directly trace, we can see how any given future (including the *child as future*) is in fact the result of processes and conditions more entangled and polydimensional than we typically allow ourselves to acknowledge. It is not just that the queer (or non-reproductive) future is more complicated than we think, but also, returning to Sedgwick, that the queer or avuncular stance helps us to see how *every future* is more complicated than we think. Just as the aunt opens for the child a window into sexuality and relation writ large, the spinster might open for us a window into futurity freed from the bounds of objects, freed from the promise of ever arriving in recognizable form. Unlike the biological mother (or the environmentalist, or the queer theorist⁹), whose envisioned future resembles the present like the child resembles the parent, the spinster aunt's future proceeds far less predictably, is far less invested in replication and repetition, is far more open to unanticipated effects. Less traditionally familial, that is to say, the spinster's future is also less insistently familiar. But perhaps all futures in fact already work that way, Carson suggests. And perhaps our role as spinster ecologists is to be attuned to these forms of variation, of non-linearity, of illegibility that constitute the futures in which we already dwell. Adequately seeing the future hence becomes a question of adjusting the scale of our gaze, of looking not simply in generational intervals, of learning to see the future not just as a state that arrives but also as a somehow medial *condition of emergence*.

I have opened my discussion of futurity with *Silent Spring* in part to emphasize the surprising fact that a text which could be blamed for inaugurating (or at least fortifying) the

⁹ By "biological mother," "queer theorist," and "environmentalist," I mean structural or categorical entities, not any actual persons or historical subjects. In this, I concur with Edelman, who insists that *No Future* is not impugning any historical child (or child-bearer) so much as pointing out structural facts about politics and society as we know them (17).

heterosexist bias of contemporary environmentalism also provides one basis for developing a queer ecocriticism. Implicit in that discussion, however, is an assertion that this more radical basis is found not simply in the thematic dimensions or explicit argumentation of Carson's book but also in its style, its grammar, and its form. With this formal emphasis in mind, I want to (re)turn briefly to Jewett in order to suggest that the tonal and affective registers of her texts – what Love has recently deemed their “spinster aesthetics”¹⁰ – might in fact teach us as much about the *feel* of this alternate futurity as Carson teaches us about its location and mode of emergence.

I am far from the first to find myself intrigued by Jewett's spinster figures, arguably the (wonderfully reticent) stars of her body of work. And those spinsters themselves can become the ground upon which to track the tensions – and gaps – in recent criticism of those writings. For if Carson – the ecologist invested in the future without directly contributing to it – is caught in a theoretical chasm between the antisocial queer no-futurists and the environmental(ist) reproductive futurists, then Jewett – the writer of muted, plotless, regionalist spinster tales – seems similarly suspended between two camps: those critics who wish to find in her unattached female characters the longing and loneliness of the historical queer subject, and those who wish to find in them instead a fully satisfying, enlivening, alternate model of female maturity. But what makes spinsters an apt object of our attention at this juncture is how they once again structurally sit between – and demonstrate the limits of – both approaches. Neither turning their backs on the future nor embracing it wholeheartedly, Jewett's spinsters exemplify an alternate mode of temporal movement and inhabitation; they head toward a future unconcerned with

¹⁰ Heather Love, “Gyn/Apology: Sarah Orne Jewett's Spinster Aesthetics” (*ESQ* 55.3-4 [2009]). Hereafter cited in the text as SA.

fruition and accessible only by moving through the spectral presence of all the futures that never will come to pass.

One of the few critical essays on Jewett to focus exclusively on the spinster figure, Barbara A. Johns's "'Mateless and Appealing': Growing into Spinsterhood in Sarah Orne Jewett," treats the spinster's social position as a positive and even "productive" alternative to the traditional trappings of female domesticity. Playing repeatedly on her titular phrase, Johns argues that Jewett portrays "the growth into true spinsterhood"¹¹ and treats life as a spinster as "a productive future for young single women" (156); satisfying spinsterhood is thus figured as one (if not *the*) desired end of female development. Instead of remaining a flexible space open to multiple forms of relation and multiple forms of futurity, spinsterhood for Johns becomes a rigidly taxonomized realm whose most favorable incarnations are associated with progress and improvement: while "[t]he growth into wholeness and integrity can be thwarted" (158), even those unmarried characters who initially have chosen the "stunted pattern" of life as an old maid can always "[grow] instead into a newer, healthier spinsterhood" (159). Rather than spinsterhood serving to complicate certain assumptions about the future, it becomes a synecdoche for them. The achievement of healthy spinsterhood – like the arrival of Edelman's scorned child – becomes proof of fruition, proof that the desired future has arrived.

In response to both this kind of triumphalist narrative and a treatment of lesbianism that would nostalgically idealize historical forms of same-sex relation (including Jewett's own *Boston Marriage with Annie Fields*), Love recently has read the literary spinster as a much more

¹¹ Barbara A. Johns, "'Mateless and Appealing': Growing into Spinsterhood in Sarah Orne Jewett," in *Critical Essays on Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Gwen L. Nagel (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1984), 148. Hereafter cited in the text.

deeply fraught and problematic figure, one aligned with the backwardness she finds in the historically shamed queer subject more generally:

Lesbian weddings, lesbian soccer moms, lesbian sex radicals, lesbians on TV, lesbians in *People*: all of these developments significantly lessen the chances that women who love women will be confused with old maids. Given that the stereotypical image of lesbians as isolated, pathetic, sexless creatures is an effect both of women's real lack of social power and the pathologizing of female agency and sexuality, this dissociation of lesbianism from the spectacle of the lonely old woman is no doubt to be celebrated. And yet, before wholeheartedly applauding the transformation, we need to consider what is lost as we overcome the "historical sisterhood" between the lesbian and the spinster.

...

In this essay, ... I return to Jewett in order to offer a fuller portrait of the loneliness and longing that run through her writing. I ... argue that we can find in her work a "spinster aesthetic" that draws attention to loneliness and impossibility as lived experience. (SA 309, 310)

In stark contrast to Johns's narrative of progress and paean to female wholeness, Love's treatment of (Jewett's) spinsters not only emphasizes their loneliness and longing (their many forms of incompleteness), but also – in a way reminiscent of Edelman – challenges an understanding of contemporary lesbianism that would aspire to acceptance, improvement, or inclusion. The spinsters, in other words, become the proper foil to the LGBT community's rhetoric of progress: as inclusion-oriented social movements pull gays and lesbians into the limelight, Love's attention to lonely spinsters (and her aligning of said spinsters with contemporary lesbians through the positing of a "historical sisterhood") emphasizes the darkness and backwardness toward which they're always tending. Where Johns's spinsters are satisfied, Love's are longing. Where Johns's spinsters are happy, Love's are hopelessly sad. Where Johns's spinsters can hope for a future bright and fulfilling, Love's see on the horizon only a dark impossibility.

As is perhaps suggested by these formulations, Love's critical approach both here and in *Feeling Backward* – subtle and important though it is in many ways – places its authors and

characters on a linear track, aligned with either the “progress” of modernism or the “backwardness” of the queer subject refused (or refusing) inclusion in a genealogical system. And so her readings remain within the parameters of the camp(s) she critiques while simply inverting their terms, proclaiming recalcitrance where other kinds of readers would customarily find progress, affirming loneliness and solitude where others would find interpersonal nourishment. But if the slanted or avuncular stance of the spinster places her outside the vertical axes of transmission and inheritance that define reproductive futurism, then it seems likely to similarly skew her position relative to linear paradigms of approach and retreat, progress and backwardness. Indeed, throughout *Pointed Firs*, the future seems not to lie linearly before characters (in such a way that they could either embrace its approach or turn their backs in resistance or shame) but both more immanently within and more irrevocably distant from the present in which they dwell. For Jewett’s spinsters, the future is never as distinct from the present or the past as either the triumphalist or backward narrative would make it seem. Poor Joanna, for instance, is oriented toward a future that exists in or as an objectless continuity with the present; Mrs. Todd reports that when she went to Shell-heap Island to visit her “remote and islanded” friend, Joanna commented that she “[had] come to know what it [was] to patience, but ...[had] lost [her] hope” (76). Although this kind of hopelessness could, in one reading, be taken as a form of despondency or nihilism, in another it comes to stand in for the stance toward the future more broadly adopted throughout Dunnet Landing; the town’s residents, exemplified by Mrs. Todd, seem to “[give] no place to the pleasures of anticipation” (85). This does not mean that the future ceases to matter to them – Mrs. Fosdick critiques those “new folks nowadays, that seem to have neither past nor future” (61) – but instead that it is not understood as a state or an

object distinct enough from the present – or legible enough in its arrival – for the distanced, gently transitive acts of hope or anticipation to become significant.

Although this alternate stance toward futurity is evident thematically in *Pointed Firs*, it is most salient – and most noteworthy – within the structure of the book. If *Silent Spring*'s syntax suggests the extent to which it might be useful to think of (spinster) ecology as an intransitive form, *Pointed Firs* suggests what it might look like for a text to unfold avuncularly, for style itself to exemplify a mode of futurity predicated on something other than direct transmission or discernible “arrival.” At the broadest structural level, as every reader of *Pointed Firs* readily notes, Jewett's sketches – portraits of visits or small journeys or individual conversations – are linked only in the gentlest of ways – by summer's almost indiscernible shift toward fall, by familiarities that burgeon as much in silences as through direct interaction, by forms of interpersonal commonality that are most often left implicit. But while the entire structure of *Pointed Firs* is non-linear in nature, the promise of an avuncular unfolding is most pronounced in the local moments of the text, particularly in the touchstone scene with Elijah Tilley:

I ventured to say that somebody must be a very good housekeeper.

“That's me,” acknowledged the old fisherman with frankness. “There ain't nobody here but me. I try to keep things looking right, same's poor dear left 'em. You set down here in this chair, then you can look off an' see the water....”

...We were both silent for a minute; the old man looked out the window, as if he had forgotten I was there.

“You must miss her very much?” I said at last.

“I do miss her,” he answered, and sighed again. “Folks all kep' repeatin' that time would ease me, but I can't find it does. No, I miss her just the same every day..... I get so some days it feels as if poor dear might step right back into this kitchen. I keep a-watchin' them doors as if she might step in to ary one. Yes, ma'am, I keep a-lookin' off an' droppin' o' my stitches; that's just how it seems. I can't git over losin' of her no way nor no how. Yes, ma'am, that's just how it seems to me.”

I did not say anything, and he did not look up. (120-121)

In this scene, as throughout *Pointed Firs*, the future emerges only as a modification of persistence. Over the course of their afternoon together, Tilley and the narrator share an

objectless watch, looking not *for* an entity that would confirm, conclude, or otherwise justify their practice but instead “off” and “up” and “out” at a vista that remains as seemingly consistent or continuous as Tilley’s life, where patterns of mourning persist “just the same” every day. Within this paradigm, the future can modify the present adverbially but is never itself concretized, never itself emerges or arrives. The most important modifier throughout the passage is the capacious “as if”: Tilley keeps “watchin’ them doors” not *for* his wife’s arrival but instead “*as if* she might step in to ary one.” The adverbial *as if* inscribes a sense of possibility into the present, even though – or perhaps precisely because – it is a possibility divorced from any potential for fruition. Or, in other words, the *as if* – like Sedgwick’s understanding of the avuncular – interweaves the present with the unrealized. In Elijah Tilley’s sitting room, as throughout the fictional town of Dunnet Landing, the unrealized – and the unrealizable – presses on, modifies, and even shapes the present; Jewett writes in a syntax where what is is always put in relation to what did not and will not come to pass. Whereas Carson’s intransitive ecology complicates our understanding of fruition, demonstrating the extent to which future is often already here, Jewett’s adverbial or avuncular style embodies a present where non-fruition is allowed to persist as such, where the path from present to future – or from one sentence to the next – nearly always passes through what could have been, nearly always allows us to sense what the present as future has already failed to become.¹²

¹² In this formulation (“what the present as future has already failed to become”), we might hear echoes of Sedgwick’s work in “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You.” There, in discussing the practice of reparative reading, Sedgwick writes: “Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that *the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did*” (*Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* [Durham & London: Duke U P, 2003], 146, emphasis mine). In a formulation reminiscent of her discussion of avuncular possibility, the future becomes less the fruition of the present than a heuristic for seeing the past; our renewed awareness of the contingency of the future (or of temporal unfolding more generally) attunes us to the presence of non-fruition within any present.

Accompanying the question of how a text (or life, or narrative) unfolds is the question of this indirect unfolding's tonal effects. As we have already seen, along with Love's attention to backward subjects comes an attention to bad affects: in her spinster aesthetics piece, she promotes a (re)turn to the spinster so as not to lose sight of "the loneliness, abjection, and social exclusion that have largely defined the modern experience of same-sex desires and relations" (SA 309), and her broader project "[pays] particular attention to feelings such as nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, *ressentiment*, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism, and loneliness," tied as they so often are "to the experience of social exclusion and to the historical 'impossibility' of same-sex desire" (FB 4). Although she is unique among Jewett scholars for her emphasis on bad feelings, the investment in strong affects is not hers alone; as we might recall from Chapter One, Catriona Sandilands decries those critics who "have not only missed the running theme in [Jewett's] work of women's emotional relations to each other, but...have even gone so far as to accuse Jewett's writing of a spinsterly lack of passion" (61). These theorists' emphasis on strong passions recalls Judith Halberstam's imperative, in a 2006 *PMLA* forum on the antisocial thesis, that queers ought "to be loud, unruly, impolite, ...to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, ...and annihilate": an assertion that, in its broader context,

Although Sedgwick's writings are not customarily grouped with those works that seek to theorize queer temporality (for critical works in this queer theoretical subfield see, among many other examples, Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* [New York: New York U P, 2005] and Valerie Rohy, *Anachronism and Its Others: Sexuality, Race, Temporality* [Albany: State U of New York P, 2009]), I choose to emphasize her account here because it posits a queer temporality that tarries with – and is shaped by – the future rather than defined in contradistinction to it. Whereas many queer theorizations of time understand the future as a developmental *telos* that queers fail to reach, Sedgwick instead understands it as an immanent facet of queer subjectivity. This is not to say that Sedgwick is inattentive to the queer community's vexed relationship to the future (indeed, the most moving section of her essay involves a discussion of her own – and her queer friends' – impending mortality); however, she often treats the future more as a modality – one perpetually embedded in, and woven through, the present – than as a hypostasized state.

critiques Edelman's style in *No Future* at the same time that it praises the content of his claims.¹³

Halberstam's list of the proper (or properly improper) actions of the queer theorist stands in contrast to what she deems the "gay male archive," which "is limited to a short list of favored canonical writers" and "bound by a particular range of affective responses":

And so fatigue, ennui, boredom, indifference, ironic distancing, indirectness, arch dismissal, insincerity, and camp make up what Ann Cvetkovich has called "an archive of feelings" associated with this form of antisocial theory. This canon occludes another suite of affectivities associated, again, with another kind of politics and a different form of negativity. In this other archive, we can identify, for example, rage, rudeness, anger, spite, impatience, intensity, mania, sincerity, earnestness, overinvestment, incivility, and brutal honesty. (824)

Tellingly, Halberstam treats as authentic and genuine only the strong negative affects on her list – a stance that likely would meet with Love's approval. The "sincerity [and] earnestness" of "rage, rudeness, anger, spite, impatience, intensity, [and] mania" stand in as stark opposition to the perceived "[irony]" and "insincerity" of Edelman's stylistic affects as Halberstam's insistently direct, declarative sentences do to Edelman's insistently recursive, punning mode. But if Sandilands worries that we will reduce Jewett's affect to "a spinsterly lack of passion," if Love emphasizes that Jewett's characters' passion puts them in contact with "all the sorrow and disappointment in the world" (FB 97, Jewett 82), and if Halberstam argues that Edelman's "ironic distancing, indirectness," and "insincerity" occlude a politically efficacious "suite of affectivities" otherwise open to the antisocial turn, I want to suggest instead that attending to Jewett's *affirmative dispassion* might open both queer theory and ecocriticism (and their practitioners) to the possibility of a non-ironic distancing or a rigorous indirectness.

In other words, perhaps we can envision a queer ecocritical mode capable of embracing a mutedness that is neither the masking nor the repressing of strong emotion, and an indirectness

¹³ Judith Halberstam, "The Anti-Social Thesis in Queer Theory," Forum: Conference Debates (*PMLA* 121 [May 2006]), 824. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

that is neither a deflection nor an evasion of political stakes. As both a response to and an extension of Sandilands's assertion, I want to suggest that the spinster figure in Jewett may be precisely the province in which such affirmative dispassion or sincere indirectness can be found. Indeed, we might account for the strangely muted tone of *Pointed Firs* by considering the equally strange fact that the text's main characters are exclusively aged, exclusively uncoupled, and exclusively non-aspirational. There is to their lives a kind of closed sufficiency, a sense of enoughness that has little use for wishing, longing, or a consideration of what could be. If anything is longed for, the sense of anticipation is always consigned to the past, and the sense of hope is always – and only – for what could have been.¹⁴

This turn to the mutedly affirmative, or to affirmative mutedness, allows us to reimagine the relationship between present and future outside the paradigms of lack and excess that dominate the customary treatment of temporality within environmentalism and queer theory

¹⁴ The book's affirmative dispassion pervades even those scenes most preoccupied by what the future has failed to become. The scene in which the narrator visits Poor Joanna's hermitage, for instance, demands that we reconsider the terms of identification and connection, that we rethink Love's notion that to turn backward (or to grow remote) is to refuse. As in *Silent Spring*, where we found a form of objectlessness that wasn't achieved through negation, here we find a form of backwardness that isn't the same as rejection. Like Carson's intransitive mode, which can tend (in both senses of the word) without ever landing or arriving, Jewett's avuncular syntax and spinsterly tone allow us to feel the full affective capacity of indirectness without ever making us (or the *Pointed Firs* characters) wish that it could be transformed into anything more than it already is. This discussion perhaps helps to clarify my resistance to the binaries that structure Love's argument in *Feeling Backward*. It is certainly not that I am opposed to binaries *per se* but rather that I want to resist the ready identification of affects and postures – like backwardness – with the ways in which they have customarily been valued (e.g. as good or bad). Rather than (de)value, then, I seek to describe: to ask what backwardness *achieves*, how it is *constituted*, and how it *feels*. Certainly, backwardness – like isolation, like loneliness – often feels bad. But not always, and not necessarily – especially not within the context of Jewett's text, where many of these “bad affects” in fact become the ground of relation and community. Similarly, if loneliness (or “loneliness”) isn't automatically bad, and if a text like Jewett's tends to suspend such valuation almost entirely, then our affective lexicon itself becomes more complicated. To Sedgwick's suggestion that critics seize the “opportunity of experimenting with a vocabulary that will do justice to a wide affective range” (*Touching Feeling* 145), I would add that we should also consider how the vocabulary that we currently employ might *already* yield access to a wider affective range than we typically believe. This impulse to particularize relates to this chapter's broader investment in not presupposing a meaning or value for its central term: the future. Just as we don't necessarily know in advance what *loneliness* means or how it feels, we don't necessarily know what the *future* means or where/when it arrives.

alike. For in both models of futurity with which we began – the futurism of the traditional environmentalist and the annihilating stance of the antisocial queer theorist – the present and the future become mutually delimiting realms. The sustainability-minded environmentalists consider themselves ethically obligated to limit their environmental impact in the present in order to preserve the planet for the next generation. The queer subject understanding himself as a bar to sociality, by contrast, forfeits any investment in or concern with the future in the name of *jouissance*. Typically defined by his engagement in a form of sexual activity disconnected from the potential of biological reproduction, the queer embraces the pleasures of the present, and refuses a future over which he feels no responsibility and to which he feels little tie. In either case, we find subjects and communities preoccupied with the question of what constitutes “enough” – a word which, in the environmentalist’s arsenal, serves to chasten those whose practices roam too far beyond necessity’s bounds. Those invested in sustainability insist that we must content ourselves with “enough”: an indeterminate quantity (or quality) that – even in its indeterminacy – seems defined by the fact that it is less than we might otherwise want. “Enough” becomes a synecdoche for the practice of not always acting on desire, of thinking beyond current wants, of compromising the present in the name of the future, of doing without.¹⁵ For the antisocial theorists who find in reproductive futurism a hegemony worth resisting, then, “enough” becomes yet another word to curse, yet another limit to break. The future in whose name such an utterance would be spoken is not ours, this group would claim. We’ve had it. Enough is not always enough. And so the schema simply gets reversed, as schemata so often do.

¹⁵ The prevalence of tropes of “enoughness” in environmental rhetoric is far too extensive for me to outline effectively here. For just one example, we might look to Bill McKibben’s body of work (which I highlight not only because of its popularity and influence, but also because I will return to it in my conclusion), which includes a book called *Maybe One* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), focused on what parents can do to limit population growth, and another titled *Enough: Staying Human in an Endangered Age* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2003).

The present becomes the tense with the trump card. The future becomes the realm that can ask for little at best.

But Jewett's writing asks us – in its tone and syntax and interpersonal situations alike – to consider the possibility of an affirmative sense of “enough”ness, one that allows the past and present and future to coexist – often on the same plane, or within any given moment – without impinging on one another. Throughout the sketches of *Pointed Firs*, Jewett presents us with a sufficiency that is neither privative nor the same as completeness; her characters remain suspended in a state removed from hope, removed from longing, where what they have (and what they have had, and what they once thought they might have had) manages to be enough. By presenting characters who turn away without rejecting, whose communities permit their members' backwardness, whose emotions are conveyed in and as their mutedness, Jewett offers us both the affect and the ethical imperative of a spinster ecological future. Jewett's spinsters, like Rachel Carson herself, implicitly ask us to inhabit a temporal stance outside the bounds of object-based preservation and instead place us in the realm of something akin to persistence or continuity, where the question stamped on the bumper sticker might unfold more like this: What will your spinster aunt have been breathing all along?

Maiden A(u)nts and Bachelor Uncles

This emphasis on the spinster aunt as steward of the future perhaps raises a question: what is the status of sexual reproduction in futurity (environmental, queer, or otherwise)? And, by extension: whose province, exactly, is the reproductive? Even as we acknowledge the theoretical, rhetorical, and affective problems of concretizing the future in the form of the child, it remains the case that persistence and maintenance – these insistently intransitive verbs – can

last only so long, are necessarily limited by the finitude of a given human life. And so how are we to understand the role of queer non-reproductivity in the context of what remains a genuine investment on the part of environmentalists (including, of course, queer environmentalists) for a livable, shared, communal future?

For preliminary answers, we can linger with Carson, and (re)turn to *Silent Spring*'s own treatment of reproduction, for the failures of traditional reproductive processes constitute not only one of the book's central problems, but also one of its posited solutions. Near the end of *Silent Spring*, in a chapter titled "The Other Road," Carson catalogs and evaluates research being done into alternative practices of pest control: practices that would avoid the collateral damage of pesticides like DDT, which risk doing as much harm to bird and fish and human (among many other) populations as to the insects that they directly target. Among the "most fascinating of the new methods," for her, "are those that seek to turn the strength of a species against itself – to use the drive of an insect's life forces to destroy it" (279):

Some of the most interesting of the recent work is concerned with still other ways of forging weapons from the insect's own life processes. Insects produce a variety of venoms, attractants, repellants. What is the chemical nature of these secretions? Could we make use of them as, perhaps, very selective insecticides? Scientists at Cornell University and elsewhere are trying to find answers to some of these questions, studying the defense mechanisms by which many insects protect themselves from attack by predators, working out the chemical structure of insect secretions. Other scientists are working on the so-called "juvenile hormone," a powerful substance which prevents metamorphosis of the larval insect until the proper stage of growth has been reached.

...All this is of much more than academic interest, for the new and economical "gyplure" might be used not merely in census operations but in control work. Several of the more attractive possibilities are now being tested. In what might be termed an experiment in psychological warfare, the attractant is combined with a granular material and distributed by planes. The aim is to confuse the male moth and alter the normal behavior so that, in the welter of attractive scents, he cannot find the true scent trail leading to the female. This line of attack is being carried even further in experiments aimed at deceiving the male into attempting to mate with a spurious female. In the laboratory, male gypsy moths have attempted copulation with chips of wood, vermiculite, and other small, inanimate objects, so long as they were suitably impregnated with gyplure. Whether such diversion of the mating instinct into nonreproductive channels

would actually serve to reduce the population remains to be tested, but it is an interesting possibility. (286-287)

This “interesting possibility” seems at first to constitute a version of the sustainable “no future” toward which this chapter’s introductory paragraph tentatively gestured. For by radically limiting (or even foreclosing) one population’s capacity to reproduce, this approach preserves the corresponding capacities of another population. According to this model, one way to safeguard our human future (including our access to those elements of the non-human world that are central to our enjoyment of and investment in nature) is to somehow queer the insect population: to preclude the need for chemical pesticides by redirecting (or misdirecting) gypsy moths’ “mating instinct into nonreproductive channels.” In this formulation, we might hear oblique echoes (or, rather, anticipations) of the Malthusian approaches adopted by recent queer ecocritics, who want to understand queer non-reproductivity as an eco-friendly and socially progressive mode of population control;¹⁶ in such discussions, the non-reproductivity of the

¹⁶ One of the earliest gestures toward this kind of logic came in sexologist Havelock Ellis’s *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1905), where, in the process of exploring what he deemed “sexual inversion,” he wrote: “One might be tempted to expect that homosexual practices would be encouraged whenever it was necessary to keep down the population” (cited in Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson 2010, 9). The groundwork for a neo-Malthusian approach to queer ecocriticism itself was (perhaps unintentionally) laid by Catriona Sandilands in the course of a Foucauldian argument *critiquing* population debates (and the accompanying discourse of limits) for their inevitably disciplinary and normative aims. At the end of a section that discusses the ways in which these debates are predicated on “disappearing tricks,” Sandilands writes: “The final – and perhaps most complete – disappearing trick involves the assumption of heterosexuality that constitutes the entire discourse. Think of it this way: if the problem of population is simply one of ‘too many people’, then why not encourage a greater variety of non-heterosexual, non-reproductive sexual practices? The fact that this is completely unthinkable in the minds of most suggests that population discourse isn’t about limiting numbers of people on the planet, but about instituting a form of ecological management through sexuality” (Sandilands 1999, 91). Although this discussion is meant less to posit “non-heterosexual, non-reproductive sexual practices” as a solution to the population problem than to point out the ideology undergirding that “problem” itself, Sandilands does set the stage for future queer ecocritical work when she writes, a few pages later, “Although there may be no easy answers, and although it may not be desirable to replace an ascetic eco-sexual normativity with (say) a hedonistic one, I do think that in this particular context a possible avenue for resistance is in the reassertion of an overt sense of ‘polymorphous’ pleasure into environmentalist discourses, toward a multiplicity of sexual and natural discursive articulations” (93). Indeed, some of that future work may be her own; in a more recent essay (the introduction to her 2010 edited volume *Queer Ecologies*), Sandilands

queer contingent becomes a Malthusian “preventative check,” a safeguard against forms of population growth threatening the planet’s welfare.¹⁷ In this paradigm, the queer (or, in Carson’s case, the queered or non-reproductive) subject becomes the necessary supplement to or even precondition for normative heterosexual reproduction. And so once again we seem to find ourselves drifting into a binary register: where queers, according to theorists like Edelman, have no investment in the future, here they (ironically) become its guarantors. Whether its ultimate function is negation or affirmation, queer non-reproductivity is cast as the photographic negative to normative biological reproduction.

And yet the most interesting and most theoretically compelling elements of Carson’s discussion become evident once we realize the extent to which her logic is *not* Malthusian – once we realize, in other words, how the analogy posited above begins to break down. For Carson’s concern is with neither solely the human population (or its ecological surrogates) nor solely the insect population but rather the interplay between the two. Whereas the Malthusian model would use the non-reproductivity of one subset of a given population to guarantee the reproductive capacity or health of a subset of the same, Carson’s model works precisely because it links the non-reproductivity of one species with the reproductive health of another. Her concern, after all, is not primarily with the insects themselves, but with the damage that has been done to the health

seems eminently sympathetic to this kind of Malthusian or neo-Malthusian reading of queerness, arguing that “the sexual blind spot in environmentalism is extensive: even in arguments about the environmental destruction caused by human population growth, the invisibility of anything like sexual diversity demonstrates that the paradigm of natural heterosexuality overrides the obvious existence of plenty of nonreproductive sexual options that might be more ecologically appropriate under the circumstances. (Bagemihl’s [1999] “biological exuberance” notwithstanding, this option has not been taken seriously by proponents of sustainable development)” (11). The sustained adoption of such a Malthusian approach in the context of literary criticism is relatively new; as a result, little of the work has yet been published. One exception is Jill E. Anderson’s essay, cited in the introduction.

¹⁷ In *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (published in six editions between 1798 and 1826) Malthus proposed two modes of controlling problematic population growth: positive checks, designed to raise the death rate, and preventative checks, which aimed instead to lower the birth rate.

and safety of the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe, the non-human beings that surround us (birds, cats, other small animals, trees), and our bodies themselves due to the effects of pesticide spraying. And, furthermore, the targeted insect population does not in fact become non-reproductive – at least not in the ways that Edelman or other queer theorists mean such a word. Rather, this fundamentally ecological relationship between and across species complicates our definition of the term “reproductive” itself. Our customary sense of sterility aligns it with death (or a gradual process of “dying out”) and opposes it to the furthering of life; the sterile being is part of the reproductive process only through his non-relation (or negative relation) to it and is related to the future only insofar as he fails to contribute to it. Indeed, Carson’s own language throughout *Silent Spring* often suggests this definition of the term, insofar as the sterility of the natural environment – and the human population – is one of the consequences of DDT that she most explicitly fears. Sterility for her is both a biological fact - “Birds seen drinking and bathing in puddles left by rain a few days after the spraying were inevitably doomed. The birds that survived may have been rendered sterile” (93) – and a metaphor for the moral and emotional barrenness of a world damaged by pesticide use – “Who has decided – who has the *right* to decide – for the countless legions of people who were not consulted that the supreme value is a world without insects, even though it be also a sterile world ungraced by the curving wing of a bird in flight?” (127) In her discussion of solutions, however, not only is the sterility of the insect population achieved precisely *through* its reproductive instincts, but this sterility also contributes indirectly (with as much emphasis on the latter word of that phrase as on the former) to the health of the human population. Precisely because of its ecological relationship to another population’s well-being, the insect’s non-productivity challenges the binary

opposition of life and death (or of the reproductive and the non-reproductive), instead constituting a kind of fertile sterility or reproductive barrenness.¹⁸

Relatedly, the reproductive capacity of the gypsy moths contribute to environmental health not by being cancelled but instead by being redirected (or to coin a neologism, *indirected*) – an important distinction both for Carson’s argument and for the queer readings it might inform. Indeed, reproductivity itself – that “mating instinct,” that “drive of an insect’s life forces” – is cast, to borrow Edelman’s language in a context where we might least expect to find it, as an “intransitive pulsion.” Where the queer theoretical context (like its Malthusian counterpart) tends to think of the reproductive in terms of objects or products, Carson’s formulation allows reproduction to persist even in the absence of a reproductive outcome, reminding us of the (often elided or overlooked) paradigms of suspension and refusal foundational to many beings’ or bodies’ (nor simply queer beings’) relationship to “reproductive sex.”¹⁹ Carson’s attention to the

¹⁸ We might understand a similar paradigm to be at work (albeit differently) in an earlier, more conventional example of insect sterilization. After discussing the efforts of a scientist named Dr. Knipling to eradicate parasitic screw-worms (responsible for \$40,000,000 a year in livestock losses, as well as immeasurable losses to wildlife) on the island of Curacao by releasing sterilized insects, Carson writes: “The resounding success of the Curacao experiment whetted the appetites of Florida livestock raisers for a similar feat that would relieve them of the scourge of screw-worms. Although the difficulties here were relatively enormous – an area 300 times as large as the small Caribbean island – in 1957 the United States Department of Agriculture and the State of Florida joined in providing funds for an eradication effort. The project involved the weekly production of about 50 million screw-worms at a specially constructed ‘fly factory,’ the use of 20 light airplanes to fly pre-arranged flight patterns, five to six hours daily, each plane carrying a thousand paper cartons, each carton containing 200 to 400 irradiated flies... Thereafter no trace of the screw-worm could be discovered. Its extinction in the Southeast had been accomplished – a triumphant demonstration of the worth of scientific creativity, aided by thorough basic research, persistence, and determination” (281). This notion of a “fly factory” charged with producing sterile insects (by producing and then sterilizing them) co-implicates paradigms of production, birth, and fertility with paradigms of sterility and death: particularly when we keep in mind (as I am trying to do throughout this discussion) that the purpose of exterminating the insect population is to protect the health of another species (here, the biological health of the livestock, and the economic health of the human population).

¹⁹ Here, it might be worth considering the possible objections to Edelman’s claims (and their limitations) from populations who find little representation in his pages. In his theoretical formulation, the world is artificially split between heterosexual breeders (whose every sexual act *could lead to reproduction*) and homosexual (typically gay male) non-breeders (whose sexual acts, no matter how frequently performed, can never yield a reproductive product). But what of those heterosexual couplings (not simply

reproductive obviates not only the need for objects as products but also for objects as mating partners; the paradigms she discusses either “alter the normal behavior so that, in the welter of attractive scents, [the male insect] cannot find the true scent leading to the female” or, alternatively, convince the “male gypsy moths ... [to attempt] copulation with chips of wood, vermiculite, and other small, inanimate objects.” Once again, the drive or the pulsion persists – and can be harnessed or attended to – without a need for an object, for consummation, or for an end.

This attention to reproduction’s possible objectlessness also helps to account for the one of the most surprising elements of Carson’s discussion. Whereas in environmental contexts, as in Malthusian ones, reproduction often becomes a quantitative question (arithmetically, in terms of counting bodies; geometrically, in terms of the curve of population increase and the ever-vexed questions of consumption, production, space, and environmental limits), here reproduction – precisely as an interspecies question – becomes much more a question of qualitative conditions. Although she does necessarily attend to numerical measures (“[w]hether such diversion of the mating instinct into nonreproductive channels would actually serve to reduce the population remains to be tested”), Carson’s ultimate concern is less with whether the number of insects goes

monogamous couples) who have no intention – and sometimes no capacity – of making a baby? What of infertile couples? What of those using birth control? What of straight women post-menopause? What of the non-sexual or asexual? What of those with sexual desires who find themselves for whatever reason not engaged in sexual activity? Edelman might respond that he is not speaking of actual beings but of figures (and, by extension, identitarian categories); those actually comprised by these figures or categories, however (the infertile, the happily childless, etc.) might respond that they have more in common with the “queer” than they do with the Edelmanian “breeder.” Indeed, Edelman’s (deliberately) caricatured (or, he might say, typological) rendering of the reproductive is out of keeping with the tenets of literary theory, psychoanalysis, and sociobiology alike; as Adam Phillips reminds us in *Intimacies*, “Freud suggested, against Darwin, that the desire for pleasure might outstrip the desire to reproduce” (115). And as E.O. Wilson writes in the final chapter of his 1973 book *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, “[s]exual behavior has been largely dissociated from the act of fertilization” (554). Consequently, this chapter’s discussion is focused somewhat broadly on non-reproductive populations (gay, straight, or otherwise) than on *No Future*’s more specific (and, I would suggest, conceptually reductive) “queer.”

down than with ensuring the conditions foundational to a more broad-based ecological well-being (including, certainly, the safety of the human population). Her formulation is non-Malthusian at least in part because the populations in question are not in direct competition – at least not in any readily measurable sense. The insects are not rendered sterile to make room for the human; there is no neat inverse relationship between one population measure and the next. The non-reproduction of the gypsy moth population does not directly contribute to the fertility or sterility of the human (bird, fish, cat) population but rather forms the groundwork or *environment* for it. And so whereas the opening of this section cast the goal of developing alternative methods of pest control as being a matter of avoiding *collateral damage*, we might say that Carson’s (or the scientists’) tentatively posited solutions eliminate the “damage” but necessarily retain the “collateral.” Collateralness, in other words – like askanceness, like indirection – is fundamentally ecological. If the invisibility of collateral damage is what Carson most fears, then the invisibility (or different visibility) of collateral benefit might be what Carson – and ecologists – most readily embrace. Or, rather, collateral benefit might be how ecology itself is ideally defined or understood. And here the case seems to be not simply a matter of collateral benefit in general but, more specifically (and perhaps more counter-intuitively), of *collateral reproduction*: of a process of one species’ fertility, health, production, and continuance indirectly (or ecologically) being a matter of a collateral being’s lack thereof. And in this attention to the collateral, we might even dare to assert that avuncularity, in its capacity to both conceive of and live the sideways and the diagonal and the indirect, ranks among the most ecological social formations of all.

Carson’s paragraphs do not necessarily warrant such an assertion or conceptual leap; it is going too far at this point to call the non-reproductive (or sterilized, or queered) insects the

“aunts and uncles” to the populations whose continued health and reproductive capacity they condition or help to ensure. But she was not the only spinster ecologist to concern herself with the relationship between insect reproduction and alternate understandings of human futurity and continuance. In an 1851 journal entry, Thoreau, (indirectly) responding to the critiques of his own bachelorhood discussed in my previous chapter, analogically linked the neuter insect species discussed in Louis Agassiz and A.A. Gould’s recently published *Principles of Zoology* to the condition of those “maiden aunts & bachelor uncles” whom society (in his mind, at least) so frequently misunderstood:

Down the RR. before sun rise. A freight train in the Deep Cut. The sun rising over the woods. – When the vapor from the engine rose above the woods that level rays of the rising sun fell on it it presented the same redness – morning red – inclining to saffron which the clouds in the eastern horizon do.

There was but little wind this morning yet I heard the telegraph harp – it does not require a strong wind to wake its strings – it depends more on its direction & the tension of the wire apparently – a gentle but steady breeze will often call forth its finest strains when a strong but unsteady gale – blowing at the wrong angle withal fails to elicit any melodious sound.

In the psychological world there are phenomena analogous to what zoologists call *alternate reproduction* in which it requires several generations unlike each other to produce the perfect animal – Some men’s lives are but an aspiration – a yearning toward a higher state – and they are wholly misapprehended – until they are referred to or traced through all their metamorphoses. We cannot pronounce upon a man’s intellectual & moral state until we foresee what metamorphosis is preparing him for.

It is said that “the working bees – are barren females. The attributes of their sex – seem to consist only in their solicitude for the welfare of the next generation, of which they are the natural guardians, but not the parents.” Agassiz & Gould. This phenomenon is paralleled in man by maiden aunts & bachelor uncles who perform a similar function.²⁰

Whereas Carson’s treatment of insect (non-)reproduction can be called avuncular only through the broadest patterns of textual association, Thoreau’s connection between the two is directly analogical. And through such analogic, I want to suggest, Thoreau’s writing expands how we

²⁰ Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau, Journal Volume 4: 1851-1852*, ed. Robert Sattelmeyer, Leonard N. Neufeldt, and Nancy Craig Simmons (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1992), 145-146.

(and environmentalism, and queer theory) understand both reproductive and developmental temporality.

The terms of this expansion become much clearer when we turn from his allusive journal entry to its source. Of particular interest to Thoreau was the “Alternate and Equivocal Reproduction” section of Agassiz and Gould’s chapter “Peculiar Modes of Reproduction.” The section focuses on the Cercaria, one developmental stage of a parasitic flatworm, and opens with a lengthy discussion of how its embryo develops within the body of another stage of the worm, “which seemingly has no other office than to protect and forward the development of the young Cercaria” and, “on this account, ...has been called the *nurse*.” This relationship, however, turns out to be multiply embedded, as the nurse itself has been nursed in the body of yet another host. The members of this generation – the nurses of the nurse – are thereby deemed *grand-nurses*. After this nesting-doll pattern of hosting has been established, Agassiz and Gould continue:

343. Supposing these grand-nurses to be the immediate offspring of the Distoma, (Fig. 138,) as is probable, we have thus a quadruple series of generation. Four generations and one metamorphosis are required to evolve the perfect animal; in other words, the parent finds no resemblance to himself in any of his progeny, until he comes down to the great-grandson.

344. Among the Aphides, or the plant-lice, the number of generations is still greater. The first generation, which is produced from eggs, soon undergoes metamorphoses, and then gives birth to a second generation, which is followed by a third, and so on; so that it is sometimes the eighth or ninth generation before the perfect animals appear as males and females, the sexes being then for the first time distinct, and the males provided with wings. The females lay eggs, which are hatched the following year, to repeat the same succession. Each generation is an additional step towards the perfect [sic] state; and, as each member of the succession is an incomplete animal, we cannot better explain their office, than by considering them analogous to the larvae of the Cercaria, that is, as nurses.*

*There is a certain analogy between the larvae of the plant-louse (Aphis) and the neuters or working ants and bees. This analogy has given rise to various speculations, and, among others, to the following theory, which is not without interest. The end aim of all alternate generation, it is said, is to favor the development of the species in its progress towards the perfect state. Among the plant-lice, as among all the nurses, this end is accomplished by means of the body of the nurse. Now, a similar end is accomplished by the working ants and bees, only, instead of being performed as an organic function, it is

turned into an outward activity, which makes them instinctively watch over the new generation, nurse and take care of it. It is no longer the body of the nurse, but its own instincts, which become the instrument of the development. This seems to receive confirmation from the fact that the working bees, like the plant-lice, are barren females. The attributes of their sex, in both, seem to consist only in their solicitude for the welfare of the new generation, of which they are the natural guardians, but not the parents. The task of bringing forth young is confided to other individuals, to(??) the queen among the bees, and to the female of the last generation among the plant-lice. Thus the barrenness of the working bees, which seems an anomaly as long as we consider them complete animals, receives a very natural explanation so soon as we look upon them merely as nurses.²¹

To eyes accustomed to the paradigms of reproductive futurity upon which Edelman's critique rests, Agassiz and Gould's treatment of insect reproduction may seem radically disorienting. Gone is the assumption that reproduction is initiated by a single act and completed within a single gestation period. The timeframe of successful reproduction is not one generation but instead multiple generations – sometimes as many as nine. Reproduction, in other words, may not be the purview of individual beings or even individual generations; what we typically understand as intergenerational paradigms are, for Agassiz and Gould, radically intragenerational, part of a single being's trajectory toward its "perfect state." And equally important to this lengthening of the timetable is what happens within the protraction or delay. Unlike both Edelman's and the reproductive futurists' fetishizing of the child-as-future, in which the future resembles the present as the child resembles the parent (in a way that impedes the potential for true political change), the aphids' reproductive paradigms are predicated on forms of non-resemblance: "the parent finds no resemblance to himself in any of his progeny, until he comes down to the great-grandson." While this may simply be read as differently teleological (a paradigm in which greater patience is required to get to the same desired end), what seems important to a reading of Thoreau is not the ultimate arrival of that end, but the capaciousness

²¹ Louis Agassiz and A.A. Gould, *Principles of Zoology* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1853), 162-163.

and experience of the “until” itself.²² Suspension, non-fruition, and incompleteness become *part* of the reproductive process rather than being understood as barriers to or signs of failure within it. Alienation, difference, and non-identity become as meaningful a set of familial traits as resemblance and identity. Perhaps more importantly, an individual being’s contribution to the reproductive process cannot be understood unless we expand both the temporal scale of our gaze (the *when* of reproduction) and our very definition of contribution (reproduction’s *what*). For in the logic by which Agassiz and Gould’s lengthy footnote proceeds, “[i]t is no longer the body of the nurse, but its own instincts, which become the instrument of the development.” The barrenness of the working bees – their very sterility – does not impede or foreclose the reproductive process but instead indirectly facilitates it. Just as reproduction is no longer contained within the timeframe of a single gestation period or single being’s lifespan, so too is it no longer contained solely within the bodies and practices of those involved in procreative sex.

It is a long way, it seems, from aphides or cerceriae to “maiden aunts & bachelor uncles.” Yet within the context of Thoreau’s own writing, where indirection is a methodology and an object of attention alike, that distance seems to be part of the point. For the aim of thinking uncles and insects together is not to cast them as identical but rather to cast them as analogical: as similar with a difference, as similar in precisely such a way as to preserve that difference.²³

Indeed, Thoreau’s point about “maiden aunts & bachelor uncles” is multiply or even recursively

²² Here, we might hear echoes of Matthiessen’s comments on Jewett’s convalescence from Chapter 1.

²³ In his introduction to *Washed With Sun: Landscape and the Making of South Africa* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2009), Jeremy A. Foster describes analogical (and associative) thinking as being central to his interdisciplinary practice: “By invoking older, less socially determined, and more analogical ways of figuring the nexus between places, individuals, and identities, I am neither suggesting that these should be revived nor that they should be rejected. Rather, I am interested in finding ways of integrating these dimensions of the geographical imagination within contemporary theories about cultural studies and representational discourse” (12). He explains that he “use[s] the term ‘analogical’ in the sense of ‘the likening of something to another on the basis of some similarity between the two’; also a mode of imagination or representation that posits a relationship in a way that throws light on another, superficially different relationship” (FN 38, p.264).

analogical; it is as deeply embedded in a single pattern of thought as Agassiz and Gould's young cercaria are in the bodies of their ever-developing nurse-hosts. The very reproductive paradigm to which Thoreau draws his analogy – that of the neuter or working bee – is itself already two analogical steps removed from the zoologists' initial treatment of the cerceriae. Agassiz and Gould first “cannot better explain [the aphids' intermediary generations'] office, than by considering them analogous to the larvae of the Cercaria, that is, as nurses”; immediately thereafter, in their footnote, they turn to the possibility that “There is a certain analogy between the larvae of the plant-louse (Aphis) and the neuters or working ants and bees.” By the time Thoreau, using less technical language, suggests that the practices of the neuter insects are “paralleled in man by maiden aunts & bachelor uncles who perform a similar function,” the appearance of the avuncular being is deeply embroiled in analogical paradigms. We might even go so far as to say that the aunt or uncle's function in a child's life is itself fundamentally analogical: to show one's parents, recalling Sedgwick's words, as “people who demonstrably could have turned out very differently – indeed as people who, in the differing, refractive relations among their own generation, can be seen already to have done so.” The uncle's relationship to the parent is a difference predicated on and made meaningful by resemblance, and a resemblance predicated on and made meaningful by difference.²⁴ And so whereas Carson's

²⁴ It seems important to acknowledge at this juncture that “aunt” and “uncle” were relational terms used widely in the nineteenth century even in the absence of particular nephews and nieces. These avuncular terms were used as often to label a class of persons as to identify actual familial relations. As Marjorie Pryse explains in discussing Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Pearl of Orr's Island*, “Stowe terms Aunts Roxy and Ruey women of ‘faculty’ and writes of these ‘universally useful persons’ that they receive ‘the title of “aunt” by a sort of general consent’ even though they are ‘nobody's aunts in particular.’” (“Literary Regionalism and Global Capital: Nineteenth-Century U.S. Women Writers,” 74) In this, the cultural logic of the nineteenth century anticipates the lexicon of current queer communities, where “aunt” and “uncle” are frequently used as labels for various paradigms of mentorship and relation (sometimes sexual, sometimes social) that extend well beyond the genetic or biological. For more on such usage, see Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia U P,

paradigmatic rethinking of the non-reproductive is concretely interspecial, Thoreau's is conceptually or analogically so. His process of writing – his movement across the page – comes to seem as ecological (achieving consequence through indirection) as the natural environments that Carson examines in her own.

Another way to understand this point might be to say that the “argument” of both this section of *Principles of Zoology* and of Thoreau's journal entry, as much as either can be claimed to have one, resembles the very paradigms of reproduction in which both are invested. Both texts (like *A Week*) seem to move forward precisely by *moving sideways*, seem to make a point not through linear argumentation but through associative logic (or analogic) and concatenated or juxtaposed claims. Argumentative fruition or completion, in other words, is suspended in favor of an accretive mode of analysis as invested in adding dimensionality to individual claims as it is in propelling these claims forward toward a convincing or irrefutable end. This kind of sideways or lateral motion has recently been theorized as a distinctly queer mode of movement, thanks largely to Kathryn Bond Stockton's *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*.²⁵ Near the start of her introduction, Stockton lays out the stakes of her argument:

Exquisitely rich problems await us. Among them is the matter of children's delay, their supposed gradual growth, their suggested slow unfolding, which, unhelpfully, has been relentlessly figured as vertical movement upward (hence, “growing up”) toward full stature, marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childishness. Delay, we will see, is tremendously tricky as a conception, as is growth. Both more appropriately call us into

1991), especially pp. 58, 73, 99, 117, and 170. See also the entirety of Sedgwick's “Tales of the Avunculate.”

²⁵ Lest it seem like a stretch to link the sideways rhetorical movement of analogical or associative writing to the concept of sideways growth that Bond Stockton theorizes, it's worth remembering that her discussion is deeply invested in sideways rhetorical forms and sideways poetic devices. In particular, she “seek[s] to theorize a new view of metaphor, one grasped not solely in terms of translation (a girl as dog) but also in terms of transport and time, a transport inside a kind of hung time (a girl who is moving through an interval of animal). This makes metaphor a moving suspension” (53).

notions of the horizontal – what spreads sideways – or sideways and backwards – more than a simple thrust toward height and forward time.”²⁶

The most important – and most provocative – aspect of Stockton’s approach is how this sideways and backwards movement (these forms of delay and suspension) is neither distinct from nor opposed to the “slow unfolding” of a child’s life. Rather than rejecting the idea of forward movement, *The Queer Child* seeks to complicate and expand its bounds, to address the other forms of spatial and temporal movement embedded within and intertwined with it. The project as a whole takes one of the most highly critiqued figures from Edelman’s work – the child – and acknowledges its own queerness, understanding it not as the embodiment of reproductive futurism’s tyrannical teleology but rather as itself a being that can challenge what Valerie Rohy calls “straight time.”²⁷ In a section of the introduction that directly critiques *No Future*, Stockton coins the term “‘sideways growth’ to refer to something related but not reducible to the death drive; something that locates energy, pleasure, vitality, and (e)motion in the back-and-forth of connections and extensions that are not reproductive. These, I will theorize as moving suspensions and shadows of growth” (13). The phrase “sideways growth” itself complicates queer theory’s customary sense that queerness and development are necessarily

²⁶ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham & London: Duke U P, 2005), 4. Hereafter cited in the text. Interestingly, just one page earlier in *The Queer Child*, Bond Stockton casts this moving sideways not as the act of a queer subject in time but rather as a potential property of time itself: “For adults, then, who from a young age felt they were attracted to others in wrong ways, the notion of a gay child – however conceptually problematic – may be a throwback to a frightening, heightened sense of growing toward a question mark. Or growing up in a haze. Or hanging in suspense – even wishing time would stop, or just twist sideways; so that one wouldn’t have to advance to new or further scenes of trouble” (3). Although the final clause of the final sentence moves us back onto the steady territory of subjectivity (so that *one* wouldn’t have to advance...), I’m interested in what it would mean to linger with the possibility of *time itself* moving differently than we think it might.

²⁷ Stockton is certainly not the first to queer the child (or to consider the queerness of the very concept of the child). For important precursors to *The Queer Child*, see Sedgwick, “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay” (Social Text 29 [1991]) and Stephen Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, ed. *Curioser : On the Queerness of Children*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004). I prioritize Stockton’s work here because of my interest in the phenomenon of sideways movement, but I do not mean to suggest that her book is without its own theoretical and critical antecedents.

contrary ideas, insofar as it renders more capacious the very idea (and dimensionality) of “growth” as a developmental term. One can grow, in other words, without *growing up*. And one can develop without proceeding down an inevitably linear track. And yet Stockton’s rethinking of queer development and temporality still reaches an impasse when it comes to reproduction itself; the movements exemplified by the queer child “locate energy and pleasure...in connections and extensions that are not reproductive.” What is remarkable about Thoreau’s engagement with Agassiz and Gould, by contrast, is how moving suspensions and sideways growth become *part of* a reproductive paradigm.

This idea of attending to a sideways movement not as an alternative to but as somehow embedded within or part and parcel with a developmental paradigm can help us make sense of the occasionally troubling rhetoric of both Thoreau’s journal entry and the section of *Principles of Zoology* to which it is indebted. For we might find ourselves halting when it comes to the language of Thoreau’s and Agassiz and Gould’s descriptions, both of which drift into the rhetoric of incompleteness when describing those beings who participate indirectly or function as surrogates in reproductive processes. The biologists suggest that “the barrenness of the working bees, which seems an anomaly as long as we consider them complete animals, receives a very natural explanation so soon as we look upon them *merely* as nurses” (emphasis mine), while Thoreau posits that “[s]ome men’s lives are *but* an aspiration – a yearning toward a higher state – and they are wholly misapprehended – until they are referred to or traced through all their metamorphoses” (emphasis mine). These caveats – the *merely*, the *but* – seem to pull the discussions back into a teleological register, where success is measured by a kind of completion beyond the reach of the nurse species. And yet by acknowledging the eventual emergence of a familiar and conventionally recognized end – the *higher state*, the *complete animals* – both

pieces also invite us to suspend it, to focus on the process, temporality, and experience of the *yearning toward* or the *until* themselves. Whereas we might customarily understand such markers of suspension or betwixtness to pale in importance compared to the ends to which they ultimately give way, Thoreau's embrace of the "yearning toward" as synecdoche for an entire life forces us to reconsider our own forms of attention and emphasis. At the same time that the lifespans of the "maiden aunts & bachelor uncles" are understood to be elements or components of a more traditional developmental narrative, they also have their own immanent experience. And once again (as is familiar from *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*), Thoreau makes the immanence of (a potentially objectless) waiting or tending legible in part through his attention to analogous environmental, medial, or atmospheric states. For he prefaces his comments on development and reproduction first with a description of "[t]he sun *rising* over the woods" and the vapor from the engine presenting "the same redness – morning red – *inclining to saffron* which the clouds in the eastern horizon do" (my emphases), and then with attention to the extent to which the sound of the "telegraph harp" is less dependent on the power of the wind that originates or elicits it than on the "direction & the tension of the wire" itself.

Although Thoreau's engagement with Agassiz and Gould, like his broader investment in the (related) scientific debates of his day, seems primed to help us (like him) rethink the bounds of (re)productivity, relation, and development,²⁸ critical analyses of his scientific pursuits have at

²⁸ While Thoreau's investment in neuter nurse insects served analogically to defend (or at least ameliorate) the problem of his own bachelorhood, those insects themselves caused a serious problem for the evolutionary theory emerging in the same era. For the flourishing of non-reproductive insects posed a considerable threat to Charles Darwin's developing theory of Natural Selection, predicated as it was on the transmission and inheritance of selected traits. Indeed, in 1859's *Origin of Species*, Darwin worried that the kinds of beings that so intrigued Thoreau might be "fatal to [his] whole theory":

I will...confine myself to one special difficulty, which at first appeared to me insuperable, and actually fatal to the whole theory. I allude to the neuters or sterile females in insect communities: for these neuters often differ widely in instinct and in structure from both the males and fertile females, and yet, from being sterile, they cannot propagate their kind.... If a working ant or other

times reinscribed the problematic kinds of binary oppositions that this discussion aims to overcome. Robert D. Richardson Jr. understands Thoreau's late natural history writings as representing a fundamental shift in his relationship to production and engagement alike:

Thoreau's late projects – or project, since even the “Dispersion of Seeds” is called a chapter rather than a separate work – on the natural year are the culmination of lifelong concerns, but they also break new ground. In the closing paragraph of “Economy” in *Walden*, Thoreau had included a short parable from Saadi's *Gulistan* about the cypress which, according to Saadi, bears no fruit and therefore was alone of trees called *azad*, or free. To be without seed was to be free of the endless biological treadmill of growth and decay, free of the economics of production and consumption, buying and spending. The ideal, then, was to be free of productive involvement with the world. Now, as the “Dispersion of Seeds” manuscript shows, the rare tree that bears no seed is simply sterile. Pliny replaces Saadi, the Stoic replaces the Ascetic. Thoreau's interests have shifted to a profound new focus on production and dissemination, in generation and creative effort. The center of *Walden* is the desire to be free. The center of the late work is the desire to connect. The movement is from economy to ecology. (384)

Although Richardson ranks among Thoreau's most learned and sensitive readers, the opposition that culminates this analysis feels somewhat forced. For the desire to connect in Thoreau's work rarely (if ever) feels all that separable from the (often concomitant) desire to be free. What of the

neuter insect had been an ordinary animal, I should have unhesitatingly assumed that all its characters had been slowly acquired through natural selection; namely, by individuals having been born with slight profitable modifications, which were inherited by the offspring; and that these again varied and again were selected, and so onwards. But with the working ant we have an insect differing greatly from its parents, yet absolutely sterile, so that it could never have transmitted successively acquired modifications of structure or instinct to its progeny. It may well be asked how it is possible to reconcile this case with the theory of natural selection? ... This difficulty, though appearing insuperable, is lessened, or, as I believe, disappears, when it is remembered that selection may be applied to the family, as well as to the individual.

Darwin reconciles himself (and his theory) to these “neuters or sterile females” by acknowledging that the scale of natural selection might be different than he was predisposed to think. Rather than reading selection's success in individual bodies (who either pass on traits or don't), he suggests, we ought to understand the unit of selection to be something broader, more inclusive: the family as a whole. In the implications of this shift, we might hear an echo of Agassiz and Gould's analysis of neuter insects, wherein who and what we can understand as contributing to reproductive success extends beyond those bodies and acts that contribute directly (and sexually) to the process. Those beings who, as sterile “non-contributors,” might seem to represent the end of the reproductive line, in fact participate indirectly in it. These reflections formed part of a much broader debate dominating learned scientific discourse in Thoreau's time. For just as the neuter and sterile insects posed a potentially fatal challenge to Darwin's theory, that theory itself posed an ultimately fatal challenge to another presiding doctrine of the day: the notion of special creation laid forth by Agassiz in *Principles of Zoology*, among many other texts. Although Thoreau had worked for Agassiz, he ultimately agreed with Darwin's account of evolution.

sense of freedom achieved through connection? And what of the sense of connection achieved through independence, through solitude, through retreat, through *freedom* itself? (*Walden*: “My imagination carried me so far that I even had the refusal of several farms – the refusal was all I wanted” (59).) There is no room in Richardson’s discussion for the ways in which Thoreau’s “without”ness (“to be without seed”) is fundamentally connected to his “with”ness (his sincere and deeply felt investment “in production and dissemination, in generation and creative effort”). And yet to find evidence of this comfortable intertwining of apparent opposites, we need not even leave those writings to which Richardson refers directly in this section of the biography. For throughout Thoreau’s natural history work, ecology is not solely “productive” – or at least not simply or straightforwardly so. Rather, Thoreau’s ecology (like Carson’s) is the meeting of productive and non-productive, of the direct and the indirect, of the “with” and the “without.”

In an address to the Middlesex Agricultural Society nine years after he read *Principles of Zoology*, for instance, Thoreau sought to account for “how it happened that when a pine wood was cut down an oak one commonly sprang up, and *vice versa*” – in other words, for the fact that the succession of forest trees sometimes confounds our expectation of direct propagation or resemblance between successive “generations.”²⁹ His answer – that animals transplant seeds from one region of the forest to another, that pine forests become the ideal shield for hardwood saplings – is, today at least, hardly surprising. What remains remarkable, however, is the terminology that he applies to the relationship between the tree species; successful planters “have simply rediscovered the value of pines as nurses for oaks. The English experimenters seem, early and generally, to have found out the importance of using trees of some kind as nurse-plants for the young oaks” (737). If the pines here are not themselves non-reproductive in the same way as

²⁹ Henry David Thoreau, “The Succession of Forest Trees,” *The Selected Works of Thoreau*, ed. Walter Harding (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975), 733. Hereafter cited in the text.

Agassiz and Gould's neuter nurse insects, then neither are they participating simply in a straightforward, linear paradigm of "reproduction" or replicating a familiar model of direct intergenerational care. Instead, they – like the aphides, like the working ants and bees, like the "maiden aunts & bachelor uncles," like Henry Thoreau and Rachel Carson – constitute a collateral model of stewardship, sheltering and supporting offspring that (or whom) they have not produced (and, perhaps, to whom they need not have a permanent relation). Although there are neither insects nor human beings in this section of "Succession of Forest Trees," it's hard not to hear echoes of *Principles of Zoology* in Thoreau's invocation of "nurse plants." Given what I know about Thoreau's pattern of reading and associative thinking, then, I can't help but envision "maiden aunts & bachelor uncles" populating these woods.³⁰

Queer Kinship, Queer Reproduction

I have no intention of claiming for Thoreau the role of reproductive futurist, of placing around his shoulders the mantle of patriarch by naming him the father of a social movement or mode of writing. Nor am I interested in redefining production, in citing Thoreau's intellectual labor as the kind of powerful and influential output that counters all of the renunciations foundational to Emerson's (and others') critique. Instead, I have sought to use Thoreau's writings – their arguments, preoccupations, and style alike – to suggest a different view of reproduction (and the spinster's place in it), one that stops reifying origins and teleology in such a way that insists upon development a linear force. Thoreau's writings on social relations and the

³⁰ I have eliminated from this chapter a somewhat lengthy discussion of the sociobiological notion of eusociality, because I was concerned about the possible associations with biological determinism. However, I do still think that eusociality – contemporary sociobiology's term for the paradigms of (indirect) insect reproduction and care that interested Thoreau in *Principles of Zoology* – might be an important heuristic, insofar as it yields an alternative between queer theory's "pro-social" and antisocial camps.

natural world, like Agassiz and Gould's work on zoology, take seriously the role of suspension, indirection, and surrogate stewardship. In so doing, they have much in common with – and much to contribute to – recent queer theorizations of reproduction, inheritance, and kinship alike. For Thoreau's attention to plant and insect life raises important questions about the scale and pace and directionality of futurity, about how queer – or otherwise non-reproductive – beings might relate to the reproductive process, and about where the bounds of that process can be understood to lie. Much recent work has taken up the question (or challenge) of queer futures; one relatively early contribution was Kath Weston's 1991 book *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*. As the emphasis on autonomy and choice in her title perhaps begins to suggest, Weston's emphasis is on the social formations through which we move toward meaningful and satisfying futures, both individually and collectively. In her model, the first step in acknowledging the validity of "families we choose" is to divorce the notion of kinship from the emphasis on biology and procreation (which are, not surprisingly, treated as mutually constitutive entities); queer kinship is predicated on *nonprocreative sexual identities* and *nonprocreative relationships*; chosen families are defined "*in opposition to the biological ties believed to constitute a straight family.*" (Once again, we hear the characteristic *nons* and *nots* of queering, the characteristic *against* of the Edelmanian polemic, those characteristic renunciations upon which Thoreau's and Carson's identities were taken to be predicated.)

This emphasis persists in more recent accounts of the relationship between queer and kinship theory; in "Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory," which serves at least in part as a response to theorists like Bersani and Edelman who view queer sexuality as intrinsically non-relational, Elizabeth Freeman argues:

[The queer subject's] lack of "extendibility" has often meant that sexual minorities are stranded between individualist notions of identity on the one hand and on the other a

romanticized notion of community as some amalgamation of individuals whose ties to smaller affective units ought to be subordinated to a more abstract collectivity, one often modeled on the liberal nation. This may be a fine thing, in that kinship itself is fundamentally exclusive, depending as it does upon the distinction between those who are kin and those who are not kin: perhaps any genuinely democratic culture needs to abandon the notion. But I want to posit that the process by which small-scale relationships become thinkable, meaningful, and/or the basis for larger social formations, and the non-procreative contributions of the body itself to such a process, are of crucial interest to queers.³¹

Freeman's account dispenses with procreation but retains embodiment; as she goes on to insist, "as a practice, kinship is resolutely corporeal. Its meanings and functions draw from a repertoire of understandings about the body, from a set of strategies oriented around the body's limitations and possibilities. ...[I]f kinship is anything at all – if it marks a terrain that cannot be fully subsumed by other institutions such as religion, politics, or economics – this terrain lies in its status as a set of representational and practical strategies for accommodating all the possible ways one human being's body can be vulnerable and hence dependent upon that of another, and for mobilizing all the possible resources one body has for taking care of another" (298). Whereas Weston's discussion of kinship, relatively disembodied and highly social, privileges permanence and continuity, prioritizing "enduring solidarity" as the prerequisite for kinship, Freeman's importantly makes room for vulnerability as the ground for affiliation, and for care itself.³²

It is precisely through the issue of corporeal vulnerability – which can itself, of course, be something we choose – that language of reproduction has begun to find its way back into radical queer theory, albeit in wildly unexpected ways. I here refer specifically to Tim Dean's analysis of the subculture of barebacking, in which so-called bug-chasers and gift-givers form kinship

³¹ Elizabeth Freeman, "Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory," *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, eds. Molly McGarry and George E. Haggerty (Malden & London: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 297. Hereafter cited in the text.

³² The question of vulnerability will become important both in the final sections of this chapter and in the conclusion to the project.

networks predicated less on sociality or interpersonal connection (indeed, barebacking practices are deemed strictly *impersonal*³³) than on biology – or, more specifically, on pathology:

Bug chasing, cum swapping, and gift giving may be considered alternatives to gay marriage not because the former involve promiscuity instead of monogamy but because HIV makes the exchange of bodily fluids somewhat akin to the exchange of wedding rings. They may be regarded as homologous exchange rituals because both confer forms of solidarity on their participants. As far from casual sex as one can get, bug chasing and gift giving entail life-long commitments – commitments that may be more permanent than those of marriage – in the sense that what is exchanged at a conversion party comes with a lifetime guarantee. It has not escaped barebackers' notice that a better analogy than marriage for viral exchange is that of conceiving and bearing children....Breeding the virus in other men's bodies creates simultaneously lateral and vertical kin relations: the man whom one infects with HIV becomes his sibling in the "bug brotherhood" at the same time that one becomes his parent or "Daddy," having fathered his virus. If this man also happens to be one's partner or lover, then by "breeding" him one has transformed what anthropologists call a relational affine into a consanguine; one's "husband" has become one's "brother" via a shared bodily substance.

With the virus coded as a gift, seroconversion can be understood as successful insemination. Men who used not to worry about condoms because there was no danger of pregnancy in gay sex now represent their deliberate abandonment of condoms as an attempt to conceive. (85-86)

Passing HIV antibodies (or possibly passing antibodies³⁴) from one body to another, participants in barebacking subculture instantiate an alternate kinship system and participate in an alternative reproductive logic, developing a relationship of consanguinity by "inseminating" each other with

³³ See *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009). Dean writes: "Although the phrase 'unlimited intimacy' was coined by one particular man, the desire to erase limits permeates all aspects of the subculture. 'No Limits!' – a phrase found repeatedly in online sex ads – may be this subculture's rallying cry.... Repudiating limits entails a discipline of challenging to the point of dissolution an individual's boundaries, in order to achieve boundlessness. In such a practice, contact or intimacy is desired not only with other persons but also with something more impersonal. The impersonality of anonymous group sex facilitates access to an impersonal intimacy that barebackers often characterize as sacred, rather than profane. In light of this understanding, I would suggest that impersonal intimacy disentangles intimacy from personhood and from the epistemological imperative to know the other, just as impersonalist ethics separates ethics from the imaginary requirement to empathize with the other" (46-47).

³⁴ Part of what makes barebacking interesting within the context of ecological thought (and ecological temporality) is the way in which bottoms often prefer not to know the HIV status of their partners, and thus often prefer not to identify when – or even if – they themselves contracted the disease. This separation of cause and effect, and resistance to identifiable origin, strikes me as a deliberate instantiation of Carson's logic, where "cause and effect may be widely separated in both space and time."

a gifted disease. In the viral logic within such affiliations are forged, barebackers manage simultaneously to turn reproductive logic on its head and adhere to its terms. For what they pass on are the “seeds” not of life, but of death, not of healthy beginnings, but of infectious endings. They come together not as monogamous, private, domestic pairings (as our narrative of reproduction so often has it, even if our practices do not always bear it out) but rather as insistently anonymous couplings and recouplings, whose intimacy is predicated precisely on impersonality, precisely on not knowing too much. (And yet, importantly, such relationships are explicitly understood *not* to be casual.) Theirs is once again (in ways reminiscent of Carson’s sterilized insects) a reproduction without product, a process whose outcome may ultimately take the form of radical bodily change but doesn’t yield a new, separate body. Yet barebackers are committed to the language of reproduction, and their practices veer dangerously, peculiarly, and tantalizingly between the biological and sociocultural usages of the term.³⁵

To understand Dean’s reproductive barebackers as modeling an alternate paradigm of environmental futurity clearly would require a lot of work: that we consider what it means to care for those whom we don’t know, that we embrace the possibility of maintaining a non-

³⁵ In this vacillation, barebackers both recall and subvert the homophobic logic in which the queer body replicates (through conversion or contagion), where queerness itself is thought to be a kind of disease. In Valerie Rohy’s words:

The charge that gays are too sterile thus expresses an opposite horror: *they are too fertile*. Thus the familiar rhetoric that – positing homosexuality as acquired, not innate – sees the queer population as capable of infinite growth, naturally inclined to expand its unnatural ranks through seduction, indoctrination, contagion, or recruitment.... In heterofamilial logic, then, homosexuality not only refuses normative reproduction but also constitutes an unnatural *form of reproduction*. As Guy Hocquenghem observes, when the homosexual refuses the mandatory Oedipal reproduction of the normative family, he is regarded as “the end of the species.” Homosexuality, he continues, has been regarded as “the ungenerating-ungenerated terror of the family, because it produces itself without reproducing.”

Like the Edelmanian argument in *No Future*, which figures queerness as in fact closer to homophobic fears about it than to the liberal inclusive model that seeks to make room for queers within existing social institutions, the barebackers take homophobic logic to its extreme. For via their practice of infectious reproduction, “the end” is precisely what they deliberately and willingly bring about.

empathetic relation to the other, that we learn to predicate affiliation on shared risk, that we jettison limits in favor of another mode of engagement, that we begin to envision ecological futurity (individual and collective) apart from life and longevity.³⁶ This may be too tall a task. Or it may be something toward which we've already been working in these chapters, without ever having anything akin to barebacking in sight. (Futures, after all, are more often than not quite different than we predict.) But perhaps we don't need to go as far as to embrace a risk- and infection-based subculture in order to alter how we think about reproduction, and to use accounts like Dean's as part of the process. For what *Unlimited Intimacy* begins to suggest – however tentatively – is that we may be able to think reproductive futurity – embodied, consanguine reproductive futurity – in terms beyond the family, beyond dyadic relational modes, and beyond a normative temporality.

Indeed, Dean's paradigms, however extreme, serve as one response to the questions and challenges set forth by the most recent work on queer kinship. Valerie Rohy's "On Homosexual Reproduction," which is concerned with the ideological problems with the notion of "reproduction" itself,³⁷ culminates with a call for further work:

The fear that queers will multiply is not...the root of homophobia; instead, homophobia generates fears of queer proliferation. That is why no assurance of homosexuals' 'self-limiting' tendencies will secure anything like tolerance; etiology will never yield equality. So if one focus of queer activism is the campaign for legal parity, including the right to marry and full recognition of gay parenting, there is work to be done beyond the families we choose. That work would begin to disjoin the biological mechanism of

³⁶ The conclusion will take up this question of a non-vitalist (or at least less myopically vitalist) environmentalism.

³⁷ In response both to homophobic fears of queer contagion and to the LGBT community's tendency to defend themselves by appealing to etiological arguments (e.g. the "born gay" claim), she emphasizes the facts that (a) biological reproduction can exist without heterosexuality (106) and (b) heterosexuality is as dependent on asexual, cultural replication as is homosexuality (123). To be a bit more expansive: "The fact of that discursive heterosexual reproduction suggests that the anxiety around homosexual reproduction – both in antigay rhetoric and in the axiom 'born gay' – is a problem with homosexuality, not with reproduction. The replication, propagation, and communication of queerness seem monstrous only to those who abhor homosexuality as such" (123).

human procreation from the contingencies of heterosexual tradition; to consider how certain defensive postures, certain appeals to etiology, have impoverished our concepts of desire and politics; and to theorize, in homosexual reproduction, queer genealogies unmoored from the geometry of linear descent. (123-124)

One response to this challenge would be to posit the diagonality of the avuncular stance (or of the barebacker's brother-Daddy, or of Freeman's dragged generationality) as the shape of queer genealogy. Another would be to suggest that there is a way to be *askance*ly procreative, to participate indirectly in the reproductive process. And in fact, for all the talk about how queer kinship opens the door for a non-procreative, non-biological model of relation and futurity, kinship theory also – at least in Freeman's reading – potentially expands the bounds of reproduction and procreation themselves:

The most obvious contribution that anthropologists of kinship have made to the project of "queering" it (if such a thing is possible) is to recognize that kinship is a social and not a biological fact, a matter of culture rather than nature. This in and of itself may not be adequate to the project of queering kinship, but it is a founding gesture. As David Schneider narrates the history of kinship theory in his classic *A Critique of the Study of Kinship* (1984), early anthropologists still left biology somewhat intact: for nineteenth-century scholars such as Lewis Henry Morgan, kinship consisted of a culture's way of transforming the basic facts of biological reproduction, assumed to be universal, into a set of culturally specific symbolic roles. Later, in the early twentieth-century work of Arnold van Gennep, "biology" was modified to include whatever a culture took to be the salient facts of conception, however removed from Western scientific understandings these were and however much they changed historically. For instance, a kinship system could include trees if trees were understood to contribute something to the begetting of a child.

This early understanding of kinship as social rather than physiological certainly paved the way for later developments in reproductive technologies to modify kinship terminology such that it now includes such terms as "donor," "birth mother," and "surrogate," all of which pivot on the distinction between a (physical) progenitor and a (social) parent. In fact, reproductive technology is a particularly visible and rapidly changing site for the proliferation of new terms that can at least theoretically interlock and detach, expand over time and space in the ways I have described: donors are linked to recipients and genetic offspring; birth mothers can have "blood" grandchildren they may not meet; one can imagine a surrogate mother and the adopting parent(s) constituting a family of sorts. Yet reproductive technology is still a narrowly biogenetic site for the development of kinship imaginaries: all the terms I have mentioned represent people's proximity to the meeting of egg and sperm. By contrast, early twentieth-century anthropological understandings of procreation as differentially culturally constructed allowed researchers to understand the social patterns and roles that emerge from radically

different senses of exactly what substances each parent contributes to a child, how many contributors there are, what count as primary modes of nurture, and so on. For instance, in a hypothetical culture in which the mother was thought to bequeath a musical heritage to a child, the act of singing might be seen as central to the gestational process. Here, we see the first glimmer of possibility that even “procreation” might be thought outside of heterosexual genitals, body fluids, genes, etc. This... may have farther-reaching implications for queer life than do the reproductive technologies that allow for an expansion of existing kinship roles based on biogenetic procreation. (QK 300)

What begins as a seeming echo of Weston’s points about kinship being social rather than biological ends with a new and radicalized account of biology (and biological reproduction) itself. In some respects, Freeman’s discussion reads like a fully theorized elaboration of Thoreau’s journal entry – or, alternatively, like an extension of Agassiz and Gould’s nurse species into a human realm. For her account begins to suggest – via the work of anthropologists and kinship theorists – that there could be something like a queer reproductive futurism, that we might be able to think of the procreative process as involving not only a sperm and an egg, but also trees and music, “maiden aunts & bachelor uncles,” spinsters and queers. Weston’s account, in other words, promises to queer reproduction itself.³⁸

And in expanding our definitions of reproduction, we may importantly also extend our notions of kinship to include those with whom we will never speak, and those whom we may never even encounter. Both literary ecocriticism and environmental philosophy have begun to

³⁸ For just as Agassiz’s and Gould’s nurse insects expand both the temporality and the embodiment of reproduction, casting as the work of multiple generations what we take to be the work of one, and casting as the work of multiple bodies what we take to be the work of two, Freeman’s account suggests that multiple participants might in fact contribute, however indirectly, to the human reproductive process. Part of this shift, importantly, comes from thinking seriously about the temporality of gestation, and taking it as a space open to collateral influence and collateral effects. The wait – for a baby to be born, a period that we typically think of as being insistently goal-oriented, thus becomes a surprisingly capacious, open space, akin to Tilley’s watch – or Wordsworth’s Touch – . For a similar account not of gestation but rather of trying to conceive, see Belle Boggs’s recent article in *Orion* (March/April 2012), “The Art of Waiting: Yearning for Conception.”

wrestle with the status of strangers in environmental(ist) thought;³⁹ perhaps it is time to begin thinking seriously about the extent to which strangers contribute to our futurity (both biological and cultural, both individual and collective), whether or not it is reproductive. And here once again spinsters may be a worthy guide; for who better than Jewett and her characters, and who better than Henry and John, to teach us how to forge an ethical relation to one whom we “may not meet,” or with whom we may never be in a state of “proximity”? What if that milk carton with which began insisted that “we care about children – after all, we’re trees and strangers too?”⁴⁰

A final thought: During one of Weston’s site visits, to a queer Christmas party, a guest expresses a sense that her present community, not her family of origin, constitutes her “home.” Subsequently, “[a] sense of shared experience filled the room with brief silence, drawing this group of relative strangers close” (31-32). Although in Weston’s formulation, “relative” is an adjective, I can’t help but wonder whether taking it as a noun can help to culminate this entire section – and if such ambiguity may indeed be part of Weston’s point. For who are these distant participants in reproduction, in gestation, in stewardship, if not *relative strangers*?

The Sense(s) of Wonder; or, Parenting Avuncularly

Our relationship to these relative strangers, Weston’s account of the party suggests, carries with it its own affective modes and pleasures; through the distances that separate us, through our shared strangeness, we are able to “[draw] close” and find a sustaining – and joyful – sense of companionship. So far, this discussion has reckoned repeatedly with dispassion and

³⁹ See especially Timothy Morton’s writing on strange strangers in *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge & London: Harvard U P, 2010), p.38ff.

⁴⁰ If Freeman’s words recall Agassiz and Gould, then they also recall Sedgwick and Carson, in their assertion that the reproductive process can be thought to “expand over time and space.”

mutedness, but engaged little, if at all, with joy. And yet this is not to say that joy has been absent in these pages, or is missing from the works of the authors whom I have discussed. For an account of the pleasures of indirect stewardship and avuncular connection, we might return not to Carson, who once wrote:

The night is a time, too, to listen for other voices, the calls of bird and migrants hurrying northward in spring and southward in autumn. Take your child out on a still October night when there is little wind and find a quiet place away from traffic noises. Then stand very still and listen, projecting your consciousness up into the dark arch of the sky above you. Presently your ears will detect tiny wisps of sound – sharp chirps, sibilant lisps and call notes. They are the voices of bird migrants, apparently keeping in touch by their calls and others of their kind scattered through the sky. I never hear these calls without a wave of feeling that is compounded of many emotions – a sense of lonely distances, a compassionate awareness of small lives controlled and directed by forces beyond volition or denial, a surging wonder at the sure instinct for route and direction that so far has baffled human efforts to explain it.

If the moon is full and the night skies are alive with the calls of bird migrants, then the way is open for another adventure with your child, if he is old enough to use a telescope or a good pair of binoculars. The sport of watching migrating birds pass across the face of the moon has become popular and even scientifically important in recent years, and it is as good a way as I know to give an older child a sense of the mystery of migration.

Seat yourself comfortably and focus your glass on the moon. You must learn patience, for unless you are on a well-traveled highway of migration you may have to wait many minutes before you are rewarded. In the waiting periods you can study the topography of the moon, for even a glass of moderate power reveals enough detail to fascinate a space-conscious child. But sooner or later you should begin to see the birds, lonely travelers in space glimpsed as they pass from darkness into darkness.⁴¹

As even the most cursory glance at this passage suggests, we are no longer in the realm of *Silent Spring* – the voice here is more intimate, more speculative, more willing to revel in the magic (rather than the possible danger) of all that we cannot know. And still yet deeply present here is Carson's characteristic interest in collateralness, in the way in which the future unfolds intransitively, outside the bounds of expectations, objects, or predictable ends. Although the passage is spoken in a voice of kindly instruction, the commands are relatively undirected, and

⁴¹ Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (New York & Evanston: Harper & Row, 1965), 81. Hereafter cited in the text.

seem defined instead by their capacity to change direction through lived experience. What begins as instruction for patient listening shifts, almost imperceptibly, into instruction for patient watching. And even this gentle transformation is hardly linear or direct; the compound act of bird-watching becomes less a charge to focus on the former than an occasion to experience the contours and possibilities of the latter: “[i]n the waiting periods you can study the topography of the moon.” Indeed, the skill here is not something precise or scientific or even gestural – birdwatching, say, or the patterns of identification that might likely be understood to accompany it⁴² – but rather a temporal stance, one that the speaker (and her auditors) share with Poor Joanna: *patience*, that mode of relating to the future that need not seek confirmation in a specific end. Indeed, even as the desired objects – the birds – appear in the section’s final lines, their presence is elusive and somewhat secondary. As “they pass from darkness to darkness,” their shadowy forms seem merely to confirm that the evening’s significance lay not in their ultimate legibility but instead in the patterns of waiting and companionship and patience that gave shape to the background against which they temporarily appeared.

Indeed, in terms of the emotional register of the passage, no attention is devoted to the successful end of the wait – lacking is the discussion of satisfaction or excitement or accomplishment that we might expect to accompany those birds “[passing] from darkness to darkness.” Instead, the emotions of the experience come from the waiters’ capacity to live and fully experience the mystery of the wait, which – like the migratory patterns with which the

⁴² Indeed, immediately following this section, Carson turns her attention to identification itself, in a way that once again values immanent process over eventual ends: “I think the value of identification depends on how you play it. If it becomes an end in itself I count it of little use. It is possible to compile extensive lists of creatures seen and identified without ever once having caught a breath-taking glimpse of the wonder of life. If a child asked me a question that suggested even a faint awareness of the mystery behind the arrival of a migrant sandpiper on the beach of an August morning, I would be far more pleased than by the mere fact that he knew it was a sandpiper and not a plover” (83).

waiters hope to intersect – may be said to “[baffle] human efforts to explain it.” Likewise, just as the most intense emotions accompany the wait, not its end, environmental emotion or investment is also demonstrated to be possible both impersonally and indirectly. For although the paragraph is addressed to relatively impersonal others – this indeterminate “you,” the child whom (s)he companions – the nuanced emotional experience represented for and through them is at least in part Carson’s own: “I never hear these calls without a wave of feeling that is compounded of many emotions – a sense of lonely distances, a compassionate awareness of small lives controlled and directed by forces beyond volition or denial, a surging wonder at the sure instinct for route and direction that so far has baffled human efforts to explain it.” Carson’s intertwined acts of instructing and remembering – these gestures slightly outside the realm of direct, personal experience – manage to yield a deep personal satisfaction.

So who is this Rachel Carson, speaking directly to her readers, focused on a whole different set of indirect consequences than those so prevalent (and dangerous) in *Silent Spring*? One answer is that these words fall within the realm not of the avuncular ecologist, but rather of the ecological aunt. For Carson was not simply a scientist whose credibility was called into question because she was not a (biological) parent, nor was she simply an ecologist whose writing evinces an alternate understanding of futurity that we – in our current queer theoretical moment – can align with avuncularity. She was also an aunt who wrote a guide to parenting: an instruction manual for parents wanting to introduce their children to the wonders of the natural world. Originally published as an article entitled “Help Your Child to Wonder” in the July, 1956 of *Woman’s Home Companion* (nearly three years before Carson became Roger Christie’s legal guardian), the guide was later interspersed with pictures and published in book form as *The*

Sense of Wonder following Carson's death.⁴³ In 1998, HarperCollins issued a reprint of *The Sense of Wonder*, which had long been out of print, intertwining Carson's original text with new photographs by Nick Kelsh. The reader reviews of this edition on amazon.com are nothing short of rapturous, and nearly uniformly embrace the sense that the book is written primarily with parents in mind. One is entitled "Every Parent Should Own This Book!" Another concludes: "This would be a wonderful gift for a new parent or new grandparent." Still a third opens by insisting that "This book makes a great gift for any expecting mother."⁴⁴ And contemporary environmental writers, too, have read the book in this way; introducing her recent book on children and the environmental crisis, for instance, Steingraber explicitly paid homage to *The Sense of Wonder* as a text that informed and inspired her own approach.⁴⁵ Perhaps it is wrong to fault readers for taking Carson at her word, for assuming that her address to parents – "If you are a parent who feels he has little nature lore at his disposal..." (49) – is as straightforward as it seems. But I can't help but think that the "if" which opens this sentence might apply to the presumption of the primariness of biological parents in a child's life as it does to its literal grammatical referent, "who...has little nature lore at its disposal." For at the same time that the book is presented as an uncomplicated communiqué from one child-lover to another, there are important traces of Carson's own avuncularity throughout. In other words, although Carson's explicit rhetoric involves "exploring nature with your child" (52), her subject position – and point of view – throughout the book is clearly more akin to "exploring nature with your nephew" – or "exploring nature as an aunt." And so perhaps we might say that, rather than being a

⁴³ A PDF of the article is available online at <library.fws.gov/Carson/WHC-july56.pdf>

⁴⁴ These reviews can be found at <http://www.amazon.com/Sense-Wonder-Rachel-Carson/product-reviews/006757520X/ref=cm_cr_pr_btm_link_2?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=0&pageNumber=2&sortBy=bySubmissionDateDescending>

⁴⁵ Reading, Buffalo Street Books, Ithaca, NY, May 12, 2011

straightforward parenting guide, Carson's book reads instead as instructions for how to parent avuncularly.

Much of the book's pervasive (if understated) sense of avuncularity stems from its unique treatment of time and relation alike. A great deal of *The Sense of Wonder* is invested in making the most of a child's point of view – an approach that necessarily involves rethinking our customary sense of scale. After discussing “the world of little things, seen all too seldom, ...[which] children, perhaps because they are smaller and closer to the ground than we, notice and delight in the small and conspicuous,” Carson goes on to explain that “[f]lowers (especially the composites), the early buds of leaf or flower from any tree, or any small creature reveal unexpected beauty and complexity when, aided by a lens, we can escape the limitations of the human size scale” (59). Although the context of this discussion is insistently visual or spatial, we might take “[escaping] the limitations of the human size scale” as a kind of synecdoche for the project of the book as a whole. For despite *The Sense of Wonder*'s reputation as a paean to childhood, the book refuses to attend solely to youth, solely to birth, or solely to development as a predictable, linear force.

At the same time that Carson's explicit rhetoric privileges the innocence of children (“A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood” [42]), her discussion is both framed by and interwoven with an attention to ends: to the sense of mortality that might necessarily inform and undergird our investment in the natural world. Near the middle of her meditation, she insists that “For most of us, knowledge of our world comes largely through sight, yet we look about with such unseeing eyes that we are partially blind. One way to open your

eyes to unnoticed beauty is to ask yourself, ‘What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?’” (52) While the first question seems addressed straightforwardly to the subject position of the child, the addition of the second does something else entirely, either becoming a message of the familiar *carpe diem* variety or, more provocatively, yielding a sense of the competing temporalities (beginnings and ends) unpredictably (and sometimes simultaneously) present in any given moment for any one of us. Rather than casting life – and the concatenated experiences that comprise it – as a force that predictably unfolds from “never...before” to “never...again,” Carson’s syntax and imagery alike suggest that these two perceptual or experiential states may in fact be co-temporal: that the beginning may be – or be in – the end.

Carson’s own life trajectory, of course, ultimately led support to this understanding of time’s unpredictable unfolding. Indeed, the 1965 edition of *The Sense of Wonder* opens with a dedication page that calls attention to the work’s posthumous status: “Rachel Carson intended to expand ‘The Sense of Wonder’ but time ran out before she could. She also intended a dedication, and so: This book is for Roger” (7). By the time we turn the page, and read Carson’s own opening words – “One stormy night when my nephew Roger was about twenty months old I wrapped him in a blanket and carried him down to the beach in the rainy darkness” (8) – the image of Roger’s youth (and of Carson’s affection for him) is already suffused with our awareness of her untimely death. The descriptions of the easy companionship between great-aunt and grand-nephew gain a somehow spectral feel, and beginnings and ends meet in a kind of conflicted temporality; indeed, when we read on in the same paragraph and get to the peak of its emotional intensification – “Together we laughed for pure joy – he a baby meeting for the first time the wild tumult of Oceanus, I with the salt of half a lifetime of sea love in me” (8-9) – it’s

hard not to stumble, knowing as we do that the years leading up to 1956 ultimately constituted far more than half of Carson's life. Once again, however, this coimplication of birth and death, wonder and mortality, is not simply a figment of my (or an editor's) interest in Carson's own life trajectory. Although most of the book focuses on the experience of small children, the final two vignettes feature the aging, the elderly, and the dead. In the penultimate scene, Carson praises the sense of wonder embodied by "the distinguished Swedish oceanographer, Otto Pettersson, who died a few years ago at the age of ninety-three, in full possession of his keen mental powers." Carson goes on to explain: "When he realized he had not much longer to enjoy the earthly scene, Otto Pettersson said to his son: 'What will sustain me in my last moments is an infinite curiosity as to what is to follow'" (89). Whereas this scene retains the book's emphasis on children and child-rearing (and a future guaranteed by the transmission of information – or wonder – from one generation to the next), *The Sense of Wonder's* final image takes children (if not wonder, or child-like-ness) out of the equation entirely. Carson writes:

In my mail recently was a letter that bore eloquent testimony to the lifelong durability of a sense of wonder. It came from a reader who asked advice on choosing a seacoast spot for a vacation, a place wild enough that she might spend her days roaming beaches unspoiled by civilization, exploring that world that is old but ever new.

Regretfully she excluded the rugged northern shores. She had loved the shore all her life, she said, but climbing over the rocks of Maine might be difficult, for an eighty-ninth birthday would soon arrive. As I put down her letter I was warmed by the fires of wonder and amazement that still burned brightly in her youthful mind and spirit, just as they must have done fourscore years ago.

The lasting pleasures of contact with the natural world are not reserved for scientists but are available to anyone who will place himself under the influence of earth, sea and sky and their amazing life. (95)

Whereas much of the book focuses on children as legacy, children as guarantors of the future, and children as the preeminent wonderers among us, this final image opens the scope of discussion – not only by suggesting that one need not have any particular expertise to enjoy the natural world but also by insisting that one of the futures in which we must all be invested is our

own. (This elderly reader, it's worth noting, speaks for herself, with no descendant or other child surrogate in sight.) Here, futurity is linked to one's own "durability" rather than to processes of transmission or externalization – to the "still"ness of an aging soul who, like the world she inhabits, may be "old but ever new." The "sense of wonder," it seems, is relevant not only to children near birth but also to the elderly adults that they (and their parents, and their maiden aunts & bachelor uncles) might someday – or, indeed, might already – be. Although such a formulation may seem to resinscribe a linear notion of development, concluding the book with the future of the children whose early life dominates its pages, it's possible to read the juxtaposition of these life stages not as the fulfilling of a developmental narrative but rather as the meeting of distinct developmental junctures within a single setting or scene.⁴⁶ Carson's book, ostensibly about infancy and childhood, allows the child to meet his elderly counterpart, allows generations to coexist rather than to displace (or develop into) one another.

This different stance toward time (and different understanding of development) also allows for a different treatment of daily rhythms within the broader temporal unfolding of a child's life – and, consequently, a differently non-hierarchal (non-developmental) relationship between steward and child. As Carson reflects:

We have let Roger share our enjoyment of things people ordinarily deny children because they are inconvenient, interfering with bedtime, or involving wet clothing that has to be changed or mud that has to be cleaned off the rug. We have let him join us in the dark living room before the big picture window to watch the full moon riding lower and lower toward the far shore of the bay, setting all the water ablaze with silver flames and finding a thousand diamonds in the rocks on the shore as the light strikes the flakes of mica embedded in them. I think we have felt that the memory of such a scene, photographed

⁴⁶ Here we once again might hear echoes of queer theory, from Halberstam's criticism of the narratives and practices foundational to "repro-time" insist upon longevity as an absolute goal to Sedgwick's points in *Touching Feeling* about the way in which the life narratives of terminally ill friends may never overlap. For much more on the latter point, and on questions of longevity and queerness more generally, see this project's conclusion.

year after year by his child's mind, would mean more to him in manhood than the sleep he was losing. (22)

Worth noting initially here is this scene's insistently ambiguous "we," a notable change from the first person singular voicing so pervasive throughout the rest of the text. Who is with Carson and Roger on these pages? Carson's niece (Roger's mother)? Dorothy Freeman? The natural world? This unanswerable ambiguity reflects how the book urges us to rethink relation: both the relationship between adult and child and the broader definition of companionship itself. As we might expect from a text that frees itself from the question of immediate consequence and repercussion, parent and child (or aunt and nephew) are placed not in a hierarchical relationship but rather a lateral and collaborative one, *growing sideways* in and through their reactions to one another. As Carson writes early on in her narrative: "It was hardly a conventional way to entertain one so young, I suppose, but now, with Roger a little past his fourth birthday, we are continuing that sharing of adventures in the world of nature that we began in his babyhood, and I think the results are good. The sharing includes nature in storm as well as calm, by night as well as day, and is based on having fun together rather than on teaching" (10). And a bit later: "When Roger has visited me in Maine and we have walked in these woods I have made no conscious effort to name plants or animals, nor to explain to him, but have just expressed my own pleasure in what we see, calling his attention to this or that but only as I would share discoveries with an older person... I am sure no amount of drill would have implanted the names so firmly as just going through the woods in the spirit of two friends on an expedition of exciting discovery" (18). Throughout the book, influence is felt bidirectionally (or even multidirectionally). Carson is as little the didactic teacher as she is the stern disciplinarian; rather, her interactions with Roger are predicated on the "sharing of adventures," on "having fun together," and on "going through the woods in the spirit of two friends." As was the case earlier, when the seemingly child-identified

“never...before” met the seemingly adult-identified “never...again” (in such a way as to demonstrate that those terms need not be the province of one group in particular, and may in fact meaningfully overlap), the rethought relationship between adult and child allows for an alternate relationship toward development and temporality alike. As in Sedgwick’s account of the friendships she shares with those facing terminal illness, the normatively linear trajectory of development here folds back in on itself. The adult as little represents what the child will be as the child represents what the adult once was; rather, the two meet in a present moment that leads toward a shared – and likely uncertain – future.⁴⁷

Indeed, we might read this scene’s emphasis on unpredictability as an affirmative, desirable echo of the patterns of gradual poisoning and unseen effects that Carson writes about so frequently in *Silent Spring*. At the start of a chapter called “Beyond The Dream of the Borgias,” for instance, Carson writes:

The contamination of our world is not alone a matter of mass spraying. Indeed, for most of us this is of less importance than the innumerable small-scale exposures to which we are subjected day by day, year after year. Like the constant dripping of water that in turn wears away the hardest stone, this birth-to-death contact with dangerous chemicals may in the end prove disastrous. Each of these recurrent exposures, no matter how slight, contributes to the progressive buildup of chemicals in our bodies and so to cumulative poisoning. (173)

In both vignettes, the question of cause and effect is not a local or immediately legible phenomenon. Rather, consequence slowly accumulates over time, often illegibly; “[l]ike the constant dripping of water that in turn wears away the hardest stone,” the “scene, photographed

⁴⁷ Also providing companionship throughout the book is nature itself. As Carson asks: “What is the value of preserving and strengthening this sense of awe and wonder, this recognition of something beyond the boundaries of human existence? Is the exploration of the natural world just a pleasant way to pass the golden hours of childhood or is there something deeper? I am sure there is something deeper, something lasting and significant. Those who dwell, as scientists or laymen, among the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life.” (88) As part of this project’s investment in rethinking relation and companionship, I’m interested in the way in which the non-human world can companion a human subject in a way that does not require anthropomorphizing the former.

year after year by his child's mind," will "mean more to him" in some as yet unknown way, at some as yet unknown moment in his adulthood than the sleep he is losing in any given day. Here, we might say, we see the ecologist's eye – constantly attuned to indirect patterns of cause and effect – turned to paradigms of (surrogate) parenting. An emphasis on local, recognizable ends is relinquished in favor of a faith in the (unpredictable) power of long-term consequence.

It may be worth acknowledging – cynically or delightedly, depending on our point of view – that Carson can eagerly advocate such an approach precisely because of the nature of her avuncular relationship, precisely because she need not be the (only) one to deal with the cranky mornings that late nights breed – at least not on a regular basis, at least not yet.⁴⁸ The book as the whole bears the delighted tone of the visit, a fact that not only allows it to venture

⁴⁸ Aunts and uncles, long overlooked by sociological researchers, have been gaining increasing attention of late in the subfield known as family studies; two books – Robert M. Milardo's *The Forgotten Kin: Aunts and Uncles* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P) and Laura L. Ellingson and Patricia J. Sotirin's *Aunting: Cultural Practices that Sustain Family and Community Life* (Waco: Baylor U P) were published in 2010. Particularly relevant here are the authors' attention to aunts' non-normative relationship to their nephews and nieces (a point evoked by Sedgwick as well); as Ellingson and Sotirin suggest, "aunts embody *flexibility*. By this we mean that aunting is not 'fixed' by any particular cultural meanings or norms; an aunt's enacted identity as an aunt depends on the particularities of that relationship.... Unlike our cultural ideas about what makes a 'good mother,' a wider range of possibilities is open to aunts to enact a feminine role within families. The aunt relationship is uniquely unburdened by normative expectations and role prescriptions. Even very 'bad' behavior may be deemed indicative of a 'good' aunt. Some 'good' aunts see their nieces/nephews only once a year, let them run wild and stay up late, feed them junk food, bestow fun and impractical gifts, and model a form of excessive and permissive nurturance. Clearly, a pattern of caretaking such as this by a mother would not garner general societal approval" (5-6). Importantly tied to this "wider range of possibilities" is the fact that – as Milardo points out – aunts and uncles retain an important role in contributing to familial and social futurity: "Generativity, or a concern for future generations as it is typically defined, can be thought of in terms of four essential components of generative families, communities, and cultures. These essential components include mentors, meaning keepers or family historians, intergenerational buffers, and fellow travelers or friends. *Mentors* are the practical guides, individuals who model action, teach skills, provide guidance or support, and generally facilitate the advancement of others. Direct mentoring of nieces and nephews, a cornerstone of generative action, occurred in nearly all areas of personal and relational life" (xvii). This intersection of the non-normative mentoring behavior common among aunts and uncles with the seemingly normative emphasis on generativity and "future generations" may be, in sociological discourse, an echo of Thoreau's "maiden aunts & bachelor uncles" and Carson's aunt and nephew, up late, awash in their shared sense of wonder. Like Milardo, Ellingson, and Sotirin, I think the aunt deserves more attention in cultural discourse – in large part because of this way in which she furthers the kinds of collective aims foundational to environmentalism in non-normative, radically expansive ways.

unconventional ideas but also allows it to delight in uncertainty rather than to fear it. In her work on queer time, Judith Halberstam observes:

The time of reproduction is ruled by a biological clock for women and by strict bourgeois rules of respectability and scheduling for married couples. Obviously, not all people who have children keep or even are able to keep reproductive time, but many and possibly most people believe that the scheduling of repro-time is natural and desirable. Family time refers to the normative scheduling of daily life (early to bed, early to rise) that accompanies the practice of child rearing. This timetable is governed by an imagined set of children's needs, and it relates to beliefs about children's health and healthful environments for child-rearing. The time of inheritance refers to an overview of generational time within which values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties from one generation to the next. It also connects the family to the historical past of the nation, and glances ahead to connect the family to the future of both familial and national stability. In this category we can include the kinds of hypothetical temporality – the time of “what if” – that demands protection in the way of insurance policies, health care, and wills. (6)

Just beneath this language of bourgeois respectability, I once again can't help but hear resonances of environmentalist rhetoric – and not only because of Halberstam's (somewhat dismissive) references to repro-time's presumed relationship to “natural[ness]” and “healthful environments.” For the pragmatic paranoia and future-oriented concern of the “what if” is the stance of many an environmentalist. The “what if” presumes the (sometimes inevitable) worst case scenario and works backward from there, buying insurance policies, signing wills, keeping our children off play structures and out of supermarkets and away from yellow Curious George raincoats that delight them.⁴⁹ Although Carson's scientific work – and the rhetoric of crisis that it

⁴⁹ These are all examples pulled from *Raising Elijah*. Midway through the process of writing this dissertation, I had a conversation with a group of college students invested in environmentalism about the challenges of – and reasons for – their investment. One was genuinely troubled by the fact that she couldn't possibly convince her “bratwurst-loving” roommate to join her in vegetarianism, which she understood to be an important aspect of her environmental investment. This led to an interesting conversation about the difficulty of predicating a movement on asking people *not* to do things, on predicating investment on restraint.

importantly engendered⁵⁰ – might be held accountable for our necessary capacity to think environmentality in terms of the *what if*, Carson’s preferred mode of engaging with Roger in *The Sense of Wonder* seems to dwell instead in the realm of the *as if*. Whereas the *what if* seems largely to be about the negative, the privative, the preventative, the *as if* is about envisioning possibility – even if, as in the case of Elijah Tilley, it is a possibility that we know is not and never will be the case. It means acknowledging – as Carson has taught us – that cause and consequence are deeply complicated (and deeply collateral) things. It means thinking not only about what we can keep from happening but also about the kinds of affects and experiences – indeed, the kind of world – we might (or might not) bring about. Importantly, this *as if* – the Jewett-esque one, its Carson-esque counterpart – is about neither utopianism nor denial. It’s about living in a present where the *what is* sits gently beside the *what could be* (and, perhaps, beside the *what can’t be* or *what won’t be* as well).

The experiential and tonal differences between the *what if* and the *as if*⁵¹ become evident if we compare Carson’s environmental(ist) parenting guide to a contemporary counterpart, Steingraber’s work about the process of raising another Elijah: not Tilley, but her own son. For Steingraber’s stance toward parenting is a knowledge-based, preventative one. Exemplary of this stance is her meditation on the indeterminate benefits of an organic diet: “So to the question of whether or not organic foods are healthier for our kids, I have two answers. As a biologist, I say I don’t know. (Nutritionists also say they don’t know.) ...As a mother, my position is less equivocal. When the results of the National Children’s study are finally published in twenty years, I won’t have any children living in my house anymore. As long as I do, my job is to avoid

⁵⁰ For more on this, see Frederick Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Environmental Crisis in the Twentieth Century* (New York & London: Routledge, 2003).

⁵¹ We might also view this as a question of punctuation and intonation: the *as if* is less the *what if* than the *what if*?

situations that seem inherently dangerous. All pesticides are inherently poisons, and all organophosphate pesticides are, inherently, brain poisons. So I don't feed my children food grown with pesticides. Period." (65) In Steingraber's account, because we cannot know, we are obliged to act in terms of the worst case scenario. Because we cannot predict, we are obliged to limit uncertainties – which could be dangers – as much as possible. Her opposition of "as a biologist" with "as a mother" thus inverts Carson's approach, which taught us to fear what we can't know or see in *Silent Spring* ("as a biologist") but taught us to relish it in *The Sense of Wonder* ("as an aunt").

Although feeding one's children a solely organic diet – like never taking them to supermarkets – may seem to involve little sacrifice (except of a financial and experiential variety⁵²), other decisions of Steingraber's seem to fall more clearly within that category. For

⁵² That said, it may be worth acknowledging that Steingraber's insistence on avoiding (or, more precisely, preventing) collateral damage seems to prevent her from leaving her life (and, more importantly, her children's lives), open to collateral benefit. At one point in the book, discussing her children's eating habits, she explains:

The presence of Narrow Bridge and the absence of television were two possible explanations for the joyful eating habits of our children. There was also a third. They spent no time in supermarkets. Whatever food we didn't get from the farm, Jeff bought at the natural foods co-op. Not only did it stock organic teething biscuits, it had a play area near the deli where little kids could assemble puzzles or host tea parties while their parents could read, say, the arts section of the *New York Times* while drinking much-needed cups of coffee. (72)

Although Steingraber is quick to point out that her husband's willingness to work two hours a week at the co-op makes the prices there comparable to the costs of shopping at the scorned supermarket, this disavowal of her own economic privilege fails to ameliorate the insularity with which she encourages her children to lead their lives. While I'm hesitant to posit something quite so market-driven as a grocery store as an important site of social exchange, I do wonder where her children – schooled in the Montessori system, biking with their parents to the local organic farm, putting together puzzles while latte-drinking adults read the arts section of the *New York Times* nearby – are likely to spontaneously encounter people who don't look like them (and, perhaps equally importantly, who don't think like them). And when their party favors from elementary school friends' birthday parties, like their Curious George raincoat holiday gifts, are immediately taken away due to fears about neurotoxins and PVC plastics, I wonder what stance they are being taught to take toward the world. I wonder how they will be taught to wonder *as if* rather than to fear *what if*. Carson's ecological intransitivity, her collateral ecology, serves to remind us that we cannot comfort ourselves solely with control and predictability. We must be prepared for what to do in the face of the unknown. We must be prepared for what to do in the face of the unexpected. We must be prepared for how to face the other-than-us. The *as if*, it seems, is better equipped

instance, when discussing a job offer that would have afforded financial security and interesting professional opportunities but also potentially would have forced her family to live in a community that also housed a trash incinerator, Steingraber reflects: “I turned the job down, fully aware that for many parents – and for myself at an earlier stage in my own life – the choice between a job and a child’s well-being too often comes without the option of favoring the latter. But as long as I could squeak out a living, I couldn’t choose to relocate an asthmatic child near a trash incinerator. For clean air, I was willing to forego retirement benefits” (159).⁵³ And stranger still is the moment where Steingraber, having suffered serious burns in a kitchen accident, insists: “Whenever I despaired at the latest setback in my own recovery or wondered how many more dressing changes I would have to endure, I made myself stop. *You didn’t burn your children. And that’s the only thing that matters*” (118). (Why does caring for her children need to mean stoically accepting unnecessary suffering oneself? Why need she act as though pleasure and health and safety are no longer on her own list of desires? Why the odd implication that merely acknowledging her own pain might somehow take away from her commitment to her children?) Steingraber’s holier-than-thou, absolutist tone (“*that’s the only thing that matters*”) once again makes environmentalism primarily about sacrifice, in a way that threatens to make environmentalism seem (to outside readers, at least, if not to Steingraber herself or her children)

to do this than the *what if*. Indeed, Steingraber’s rhetoric is full of negatives and absolutes: *No time. Don’t feed. Period*. In order to avoid the *no future* that so cripples her, Steingraber – it seems – insists on living in a present full of *nos*. I should perhaps clarify here that I am not impugning Steingraber the actual mother, whom I don’t know and whose parenting I would never presume to evaluate, let alone judge. Rather (like Edelman in his attention to parents), I am treating her a bit more figurally, as emblematic of a particular stance toward parenting that her words endorse, even if her actual behavior in the actual world might complicate in important ways. I will return to these questions in my conclusion.

⁵³ Steingraber’s momentary acknowledgment of contingency here – that she could not have made the same choice at an earlier, more contingent moment in her life – serves not to inscribe a sense of possibility but rather to fortify a traditional developmental trajectory. In the proselytizing logic of *Raising Elijah*, we should all aspire to grow into adult Sandra’s shoes, should all make our way through the maturation process that shepherded her younger self into the present moment.

averse to spontaneity and pleasure and intense emotion alike. No wonder Edelman says fuck to this future. No wonder Greta Gaard has deemed it “erotophobic.”⁵⁴ If the environmentalism of the *what if* inspires us to say no (a phrase I mean in any number of ways), then perhaps the environmentalism of the *as if* – the environmentalism of wonder – can make us consider (in ways more nuanced than the calls for green hedonism addressed in the introduction) how we might differently say yes.

Important to such an ecological *as if* is the way in which *wonder* is fundamentally different (both tonally and temporally) from those terms that both resemble and oppose it. Unlike, for instance, love and appreciation, these other modes of investment often thought to engender (or signal) good stewardship, wonder contains within it astonishment, surprise, the capacity for a perpetual sense of newness. Insofar as it is necessarily predicated on what we don’t know, what we don’t fully understand, what we are unable to expect, it necessarily tends toward the future, but not a future that we can predict or recognize in advance. And wonder, too, might be said to be an effective alternative to fear. In the face of the unknown, we can paranoically fear or naively hope, both stances which seek confirmation in the world that actually comes to pass; more open – and, yes, potentially more risky, although also full of the potential collateral benefits like joy and surprise and unexpected friendship – is to engage in a kind of wonder that by definition seeks no particular confirmation, that doesn’t pretend to know its outcome in advance. Given that the “mother of environmentalism” focuses so insistently on

⁵⁴ The term “erotophobia” was first used in this context by Greta Gaard in “Toward a Queer Ecofeminism” (*Hypatia* 12.1 [1997]), 118.

wonder in this book on avuncular parenting, we might ask: What would it mean to understand *wonder* as the ethically imperative stance of the environmentalist subject?⁵⁵

To understand the contours and (perhaps indeterminate) consequences of such a shift, we can turn our gaze one more time from ecocriticism to queer theory. In the essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” Sedgwick advocates that queer theory move beyond the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that dominates much work in the field. For her, this has as much to do with the dimensionality and temporality of reading as with the interpretations ultimately posited, and her convincing account of why queer readings need not be (exclusively) paranoid often sounds – despite its quite different tone and vocabulary – surprisingly like *The Sense of Wonder*:

To recognize in paranoia a distinctively rigid relation to temporality, at once anticipatory and retroactive, averse above all to surprise, is also to glimpse the lineaments of other possibilities. Here, perhaps, Klein is of more help than Tomkins: to read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader *as new*; to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones. Hope, often a fracturing, even traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates.... [I]f, as I’ve shown, a paranoid reading practice is closely tied to a notion of the inevitable, there are other features of queer reading that can attune it exquisitely to a heartbeat of contingency. The dogged, defensive narrative stiffness of a paranoid temporality, after all, in which yesterday can’t be allowed to have differed from today and tomorrow must be even more so, takes its shape from a generational narrative that’s characterized by a distinctively Oedipal regularity and repetitiveness: it happened to my father’s father, it happened to my father, it is happening to me, it will happen to my son, and it will happen to my son’s son. But isn’t it a feature of queer possibility – only a contingent feature, but a real one, and one that in turn strengthens the force of contingency itself – that our generational relations don’t always proceed in this lockstep? (146-147)

⁵⁵ Or, perhaps, as the privileged purview of the queer ecocritical/environmental subject. As Jeffrey J. Cohen insists, “queering is at its heart a process of wonder” (cited in *Queering the Non/Human*, 1).

Beyond the way in which this discussion can help us to align Steingraber's paranoiac (or immunitary) stance toward uncertainty with her insistently rigid, heteronormative, fixed stance toward futurity, Sedgwick's work matters here for how it articulates the ethical and hermeneutic importance of surprise (and uncertainty, and wonder) as such – whether or not said surprise turns out to be a happy one. My favoring of Carson over Steingraber, of avuncular over “traditional” parenting, and of the “as if” over the “what if” may seem naïve, the uninformed opinion of a writer not (or not yet) directly responsible for children on a daily basis. But by suggesting that we practice an environmentalism of wonder, I do not mean to deny danger or risk or vulnerability; instead, like Sedgwick, I aim to promote a kind of ethical openness to the unknown, one that acknowledges, rather than denies, the troubles that often lie both behind and ahead.⁵⁶ Indeed, many recent (re)readings of Sedgwick have called attention to the fact that reparative reading is not always “happy” or optimistic reading, and that Sedgwick herself (self-consciously) operates at least in part in a paranoid mode, even in an essay written to critique such practices. Heather Love, for instance, reflects:

As in Klein, the schizoid position and the depressive position can't really be separated from each other: subjects vacillate between these two positions without ever coming to rest. My own reading of Sedgwick's essay vacillates between a schizoid-paranoid mode and a reparative mode. What the essay argues, and what it performs, is the impossibility of choosing between them. So many of us feel compelled to answer Sedgwick's call to reparation, which cracks us out of academic business as usual and promises good things both for Sedgwick and for us. But I also think we need to answer the call to paranoia and aggression. Sedgwick taught me to let the affect in, but it's clear that by doing so I won't only be letting the sunshine in.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Indeed, we might say that Steingraber's position, for all its scientific learnedness, is the more naïve, insofar as its immunitary, preventative paradigm seeks to avoid problems as much as it does to confront or resolve them, and ultimately cordons her children off from a broader sense of community even as it proclaims the value of the local and the cooperative. For more the temporality and ethics of the immunitary position in Steingraber, see my conclusion.

⁵⁷ Heather Love, “Truth and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” (*Criticism* 52.2 [Spring 2010]), 238-239. For another take on bad affect (or mixed affect) in Sedgwick, see the contribution to that (special) issue by Jonathan Flatley, “Unlike Eve Sedgwick.”

Although Love's reading of Sedgwick is clearly informed by her own (well-established) interest in bad feelings, she is right to find in the essay a range of emotions often overlooked. For, as even just the short selection excerpted above forces us to acknowledge, "hope" (one of those emotions that readers of Sedgwick like to foreground) is "often a fracturing, even traumatic thing to experience"; "horror" is not precluded but instead (because not predicted) allowed to be "new"; and, most importantly for the current discussion, it is only "because there can be terrible surprises [that] there can also be good ones." And so Sedgwick's reparative stance, far from protecting us from harm or risk or bad affect, instead suggests how we might develop an ethics of vulnerability – as, I've tried to argue, does Carson, even if her work customarily has been understood both to inspire and to sanction writing like Steingraber's. For while the paranoid stance (of both the queer reader and the environmentalist subject) is predicated on keeping things out, the reparative stance, as Love reminds us, encourages us to consider the ethical and communal consequences (rewards, challenges) of "letting [things] in" – the good and the bad alike.

In such openness (to surprise, to vulnerability, to queer possibility, to non-normative reproductive futures, to alternate paradigms of kinship), I want to suggest, we may more fully grasp the lineaments of an environmentalism predicated on the sense of wonder. Here, reparative reading's status as *practice* returns to the fore. For the reparative stance, predicated as it is on the Kleinian depressive position, is the position "from which it is possible ... to use one's own resources to assemble or 'repair' the murderous part-objects into something like a whole – though, I would like to emphasize, *not necessarily like any pre-existing whole*" (128, original emphasis). And so we might envision (indeed, have been envisioning) a new environmental ethic that takes as its raw materials Dickinson's Gaps, "filled" with the things that caused them,

Thoreau's meteorological absences, Jewett's ambient "poor"ness and loss, and Carson's intransitive verbs, which, in the process of accounting for damage, reach without ever reaching. Together, these spinsterly non-objects, all signs of pain or harm (here, we might recall my agreement with Michael Cobb, expressed in the preface, that we need not abandon disquiet), can be built, reparatively, "into something like a (w)hole."

Indeed, slightly earlier in the essay, Sedgwick reflects: "It's not even necessarily true that the two [paranoid and reparative reading] make different judgments of 'reality': it isn't that one is pessimistic and sees the world as half empty, while the other is optimistic and sees it as half full. In a world full of loss, pain, and oppression, both epistemologies are likely to be based on deep pessimism... But what each looks for – which is again to say, the motive each has *for looking* – is bound to differ widely" (138).⁵⁸ Unlike Steingraber's approach to environmental and familial futurity, which seeks confirmation of its suspicions and validation of its sacrificial tendencies in the external world, Sedgwick's model (like Carson's) reminds us that looking can meaningfully persist and even carry us into a different future; at stake is not an action on its own – the looking – but also the motives that we have for it – the expectations that we, like Elijah Tilley, bring to the watch. To invert Sedgwick's terms, queer ecocriticism – like Carson's intransitive model of futurity and avuncular parenting alike – can help us (echoes of Thoreau's river journey once again on this page) learn how to keep *looking* but stop *looking for*.⁵⁹ Like

⁵⁸ I will return to the fundamental pessimism of both stances in my conclusion, which looks once again to Sedgwick.

⁵⁹ In the *Orion* article cited above, Belle Boggs reflects on her struggles with infertility, interweaving her own experiences with stories of pregnancy, fertility, and surrogacy in the animal world. Comparing her own struggles to conceive (which are made more painful, she emphasizes, by society's presumption that she will) to the experience of animals who haven't yet (or maybe won't ever) give birth, she writes: "Nonhuman animals wait without impatience, without a deadline, and I think that is the secret to their composure. Reproductively mature for more than half her life, Acacia waits without knowing she is waiting. The newly hatched cicadas will wait underground for another thirteen years. The submissive marmoset who declines sex, or whose ovaries fail to produce mature follicles, waits and waits—maybe

Tilley's Watch – and Wordsworth's Touch –, as important as any object or end is what can happen – collaterally, unexpectedly, indirectly – in the space of the dash.

* * * * *

Near the end of *Intimacies*, Adam Phillips, responding to Leo Bersani, suggests that “[i]mpersonal intimacy asks of us what is the most inconceivable thing: to believe in the future without needing to personalize it. Without, as it were, seeing it in our own terms” (117). Perhaps all that has come before in this chapter – grammatical intransitivity and tonal mutedness, maiden aunts & bachelor uncles, nurse species and neuter insects, queer kinship and barebacking, the possibility of parenting avuncularly – has been little more than an attempt to make the inconceivable conceivable, to use language and science and biography (and the interstices between) to grant this impersonal future recognizable (if not predictable) form.

Coda

And yet another twist in a topic whose spiraling patterns only expand the longer I sit with its complexities: In a JSTOR search for Carson's *The Sense of Wonder*, I found astonishingly few relevant results – a mid-century book on nature and child-rearing, more picture than text, being not the most enticing object of study for literary critics. (Tellingly, a search for the same in the MLA Bibliography yields not a single hit.) But rather than close the browser in the face of three pages of apparent dead ends (results from *The American Journal of Sociology*,

forever.” Although I think Boggs's account problematically romanticizes the experience of the animals, understood to be (simplistically) unthinking, I still find interesting her rendering of this indefinite, stoic wait, the waiting that isn't known or seen or labeled as such. For there is an immanence here that feels akin, somehow, to the immanence of the looking without looking for, and an openness – to what might happen, and to what might not – that feels akin to a queer rethinking of the unfolding of time. Indeed – linking Boggs's comment to Sedgwick's formulation to my last chapter's discussion of Thoreauvian non-agentiveness (which is itself, of course, indebted to Sedgwick) – we might ask what the human equivalent is to this waiting-without-knowing, and whether we might be well served to develop a practice of it.

Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the Royal Society, and *The American Biology Teacher*, among others), I began clicking through to the articles themselves. And suddenly, this gem: Leah van Belle's "A Sense of The Beautiful: Life Cycles And Insects," a review in *BioScience* of five books for school-aged children about insect reproduction. Van Belle uses Carson's claim in *The Sense of Wonder* that "[i]t is not so half important to *know* as to *feel*" to inform and justify her own priorities as a reviewer: "Carson was right when she argued that an aesthetic and emotional response to nature can ignite a hunger for deeper scientific understanding. Shouldn't our children's science books also evoke such responses?"⁶⁰ But more interesting than her use of Carson is her use of anecdote, as the review opens with her own experience with insects, text, and the elementary school classroom:

I still remember vividly my preschool and kindergarten students' reactions almost 20 years ago when I read aloud *Ladybugs and Other Insects* from the Scholastic First Discovery series (Jeunesse and Peyrols 1989). The book, still in print, has transparent overlays that reveal with each page turn the fascinating life cycle of ladybugs. The pages are filled with abundant white space, drawing the younger reader to the details of the insects. This was the first science book that had my students absolutely mesmerized. They often wanted to hear works of fiction read aloud again, but this was the first time they begged to be read a science book over and over again. And even though they couldn't yet read many of the words by themselves, they poured over the illustrations during free reading time.

We looked for and carefully netted insects on our walks around the schoolyard and through the adjoining woods. Our classroom filled with terrariums fashioned into temporary insect abodes and observatories. We cowrote observations in an oversized science notebook. We wondered together about all sorts of entomological questions that, in turn, led us to read more books about insects. This single book fueled an explosive interest in insects; it tapped into the children's sense of wonder about the natural world in a way that had a profound impact on our classroom. (892)

Reading van Belle's words, I was unexpectedly transported back to my own elementary school education, which each year brought with it a new scientific fascination – dinosaurs, volcanoes, astronomy – that my parents willingly indulged through an ever-expanding library of children's

⁶⁰ Leah van Belle, "A Sense of The Beautiful: Life Cycles and Insects" (*BioScience* 58.9 [October 2008]), 893. Hereafter cited in the text.

books. My interest in books as path to scientific discovery soon enough gave way to an investment in books and textuality themselves – a shift so dramatic that I now sit in a basement library carrel, my only access to the young spring day outside the faded images of “the lichen called reindeer moss” and the (once-)bright red Bunchberry populating Carson’s pages. (Just because I don’t malign my cubicle, unlike Lawrence Buell, doesn’t mean I fail to notice it.) And yet there is a sense of wonder here, too: one that makes me consider whether I can find an unexpected overlap between Thoreau’s journals (the brown-bound volumes stretched across this desk), Carson’s life(’s work), and van Belle’s students’ gleeful journey into the natural world.

For it may not be a coincidence that a book about insect life cycles is the one that captured the students’ interest in nature, became the first “nonfiction” book whose appeal could hold a candle to the worlds imagined by children’s fiction. The transparent pages of the Scholastic publication seem both wonderfully accessible and enticingly exotic, sitting somewhat adjacent or sideways to children’s curiosity about their own origins. (Here, I have recourse not to my own inquiries but to my memories of my younger sister’s request, voiced so often at just this age: “Mommy, tell me the story of when I was born.”) *Ladybugs and Other Insects* doesn’t answer this question but rather changes and complicates it, making a far different reproductive process (one where “mommies” play a much different role) legible to the naked eye. Not only is reproduction made both stranger and more accessible than children that age are wont to think (indeed, perhaps stranger than we too are wont to think), but the insects that students already know how to recognize are proven to be just one stage in a complicated life cycle, just one moment in a life whose temporality is not immediately legible to the naked eye.

The Scholastic “nonfiction” book acknowledges that to see the world in its complexity – or, perhaps, to make this complexity mean – we may need to alter the scale at which we view it.

Those insects, small and quick in the natural world, must be glossy and enlarged, their hypervivid figures isolated amidst the “abundant white space” of the page. And the processes of reproduction and metamorphosis must be arranged as static stages whose unfolding – whose dynamism – happens along with the turning of the page. This is the natural world at a different scale. This is the natural world in a different dimensionality. This is the natural world unfolding at a different pace. I mean this not as a critique – not to suggest that van Belle’s privileged example of nonfiction is in fact simply another version of the fiction that her students usually prefer. And yet I do want to claim this book as distinctly literary: for the way in which it uses the page, for the way in which it allows the temporality of reading to produce an experience importantly different from the “real world” while simultaneously remaining faithful to that world that it seeks to convey. Those with greater scientific proclivities than I have – those who didn’t give up so soon on dinosaurs and volcanoes and astronomy – might claim that this work of scale-shifting primarily resembles the work of scientific instruments, that these insects are available on the page as they might be under a microscope. But I want to suggest instead that the relationship of these insects to their real-world referents is more akin to the relationship of a (realist) work of literature to the world to which it indirectly speaks.

For when I turned to literature, I did so not in search of escape (science fiction, fantasy, and related genres appealing to me neither then nor now) but for its presentation of a reality only slightly different – but significantly so – from the one I already lived. The same holds true today. When I read Jewett’s sketches of Dunnet Landing or Thoreau’s account of a river journey both real and imagined, I am interested in how literary modes of envisioning and presenting the world (the sketch, the lyric, the travel narrative, the novel) can present a reality just to the side of (just sideways to...) the one we already know. The world is already different than we think. The

possibilities for reimagining it are already immanent, are already here. Although from a pedagogical point of view, van Belle is most interested in the way in which a book led her students out into the world, from a theoretical or literary critical point of view, I am interested in how the book exists in a productive tension with that world, how it gives us a different reality than the one we find when we go outside. This is not to suggest that outside is not important, of course; as a literary critic deeply invested in the environment, that is not a move I want to make. And yet rather than understanding literature as either a mimetic approximation of or a distraction from that world, I want to acknowledge its capacity to dwell somewhere between the two. That capacity is in large part what this dissertation has sought to explore.

Returning to the particular content of *Ladybugs and Other Insects* for a moment, I find myself thinking about the ways in which such a book has the capacity to make different – a verb I mean in two simultaneous ways: *reveal as already different* and (perhaps through so doing) *transform* – not only its direct antecedent but also those phenomena to which it less directly refers. For I remain convinced that one of the reasons that children of this age would be so fascinated by such a book is how it helps their interest in bugs meet their interest in babies. Where van Belle's discussion is more focused on the former, my mind can't help but drift to the latter, and to the radical possibilities perhaps quietly present in this presentation of a world just to the side of the one we know. I do not mean to suggest, of course, that five and six year olds look at a picture of a chrysalis or of a worker bee and see "maiden aunts & bachelor uncles." But in the most speculative of ways, I do wonder whether the transparent pages of *Ladybugs and Other Insects* might inspire not only future ecologists (and future ecocritics), but future queer activists (and queer theorists) as well. If, as Sedgwick claims, "[w]e are many, the queer women and men whose first sense of the possibility of alternative life trajectories came to us from our uncles and

aunts,” I find myself wondering whether these insects (on the transparent page of the children’s book, in the woods, as imagined by a bachelor uncle in 1851 or in one of the most influential works this country’s environmental movement has ever seen) might for some students do the same. Thoreau, after all, is not the only one who knows how to think – or to live – analogically.

* * * * *

And one final turn of the screw: Lest this chapter’s engagement with insect reproduction still seem at best incidental, and at worst hopelessly irresponsible (writing an ecocritical dissertation at a university with a thriving entomology department [one to which Carson refers repeatedly in *Silent Spring*], I’m constantly aware of all I do not know), it’s worth recalling the second definition of “spinster,” according to the *OED*: “A spider, or other insect that spins.”⁶¹

Perhaps spinster ecology need not be (solely) a human phenomenon at all.⁶²

⁶¹ “Spinster,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Second Edition 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford U P. 20 November 2010. <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>

⁶² Although such a suggestion likely seems too speculative to be persuasive at this point, I mean it largely to gesture toward a topic that has been present throughout these pages but has received little direct attention: the status of the nonhuman, or the other-than-human. As I consider how to expand/revise this project, I am interested in attending to the ways in which spinsterly modes of relation (which manage to incorporate the dead, the animal, the stony, the caryatidic, the viral, the absent, the atmospheric, etc.) might help us to develop a model of impersonal (and even nonhuman/posthuman) affect/care.

CONCLUSION:
TERMINAL REGIONS: QUEER ECOCRITICISM AT THE END

Save the Earth

In his 1989 book *The End of Nature*, widely credited as the first text to introduce the concept of global climate change to a mainstream audience, Bill McKibben accounted for Americans' hesitancy as environmental stewards by explaining that "[t]he end of nature ... makes us reluctant to attach ourselves to its remnants, for the same reason that we usually don't choose friends from among the terminally ill" (179). Coming as it does late in a book full of startling ethical and scientific claims, McKibben's comment can easily pass unnoticed, especially by those of us who grew up on a steady diet of bumper stickers, buttons, and Sierra Club mailings that named our primary tasks as environmentalists to be, first, to "love the planet" and, then, presumably in and through that love, to "save the earth." In keeping with this familiar rhetoric, McKibben's statement predicates investment on health, and makes life and longevity the environmentalist's unquestioned priorities. For those of us in the game of saving, death is the ultimate failure. For those of us committed to planetary well-being, terminal illness is what we most fear. This logic seems simple enough, perhaps, and yet, if you are like me, McKibben's analogy is enough to give you pause. For although his comparison is designed to make us want to nurse the planet back to health, we are left to wonder about the fate of the terminally ill, those ailing beings whom the constituent members of McKibben's anonymous "we" are so reluctant to befriend. If we are not quite so ready as McKibben to align terminality with futurelessness, incapacity, and isolation, how *might* we relate to those whose lives are coming to an end? And how could the possible answers to this question offer a new mode of environmental relation both to a planet that is ailing and at risk, and to that vulnerability or weakness itself? *The End of*

Nature does not necessarily encourage this line of inquiry, using the terminally ill as a figure, simply, for a planetary and personal fate that we wish to avoid. But I would like to suggest that it might be time for ecocriticism and environmentalism alike to take seriously the issues of vulnerability that McKibben implicitly raises only to steadfastly avoid.

I have chosen to begin with McKibben's statement not only because it introduces what will become this conclusion's central term – terminality – but also because it is emblematic of the phobic stance toward illness, frailty, and death apparent in much environmental (or, more properly, environmentalist) discourse. It almost goes without saying that mainstream environmentalism is an intensely vitalist movement, its rhetoric and its practices invested in saving, in healing, in promoting life, in protecting both ourselves and the planet on which we dwell. The threat of death and extinction serves largely to motivate us to immediate and intensive action; within the temporality of crisis, in other words, terminality is the horizon that we must work urgently to avoid. When death *has* figured as an affirmative aspect of environmental stewardship, rather than simply as a fate to be feared, it has tended to appear in a misanthropic and anti-humanist guise. Emerging mainly in the Deep Ecology movement's neo-Malthusian branches, which argue that environmental problems are fundamentally problems of human overpopulation, and that humanism, anthropocentrism, and their accompanying sins are to blame for planetary degradation, such portrayals of death figure it as a necessary path to zero or, more radically, negative population growth. And so we read in an 1987 article published by Earth First! activist Christopher Manes that AIDS, rather than an epidemiological problem to be solved, is in fact an environmental solution to be embraced.¹ Or we see on the website and in the publicity materials of the Boston-based "Church of Euthanasia" the prominently placed slogan

¹ Miss Ann Thropy (Christopher Manes), "Population and AIDS," *Earth First* 7.5 (May 1, 1987).

“Save the Planet, Kill Yourself” which leads in turn to the organization’s four foundational practices: suicide, abortion, cannibalism, and sodomy.² Analyzing the work of these groups could be a project of its own, but for now, I want mainly to highlight two aspects of their rhetoric: first, the way in which – in keeping with the intensity of a crisis-based political mode – the urgency of appeals to “save” are matched or mirrored by the urgency of appeals to kill or to let die, and, second, the extent to which death here, even while celebrated, exists primarily as a foil to and precondition for the continuance of life. Even when human death is advocated rather than feared, that is to say, the logic remains sacrificial, and the ultimate goal remains rescue – saving the planet (at virtually any cost) is an unquestioned aim. I want to counter or at least complicate these paradigms not by offering an alternate path to salvation, but rather by asking a controversial question that challenges their very premise. Why are we so sure that *saving* is what we need or want to do?

Queer Terminality: Reading and Repairing

I am of course not advocating that we disregard the well-being of the planet, that we adopt a fatalistic relationship toward mortality and ends. This is not a piece about the ethics of abandon or neglect. However, I do want to suggest that the vitalism that suffuses environmentalist thought, that implicitly casts anything short of saving as a fundamental failure, not only makes it difficult to reckon with the questions of vulnerability, risk, and fragility that are centrally important to our present environmental moment, but also occludes the forms of action and relation that terminality itself can occasion. Rethinking terminality, I will argue, can help us to rethink both the temporality and the affects upon which we predicate – or in which we practice

² “Church of Euthanasia.” www.churchofeuthanasia.org. Web. December 28, 2011.

– environmental stewardship. And so if what environmentalism needs is a model for ethically relating to the terminally ill, or for thinking through the potentially affirmative relationship between terminality and relation, where might it – and we – turn? One answer is queer theory, this intellectual field that took much of its inaugural energy and impetus from the epidemiological and social crises surrounding HIV & AIDS, and whose most influential practitioners have lived and died and thought and written while companioned by terminality. So far in this conclusion, queerness has perhaps been the elephant in the room, appearing only in passing, as a set of practices, affiliated with death, that can – in the Radical Deep Ecologists’ logic – help to save the planet; or as a set of practices, defined in part by their non-reproductivity, that provide little entry into an insistently natalist, future-oriented environmentalism. But I want to turn now more directly to queerness, to suggest – as I have throughout this project – that queer theory, queer literature, and queer modes of affiliation have more to contribute to environmental thinking than either of these accounts would suggest. In particular, I want to argue here that the way that queer literary scholars (and queer writers) have thought through the future of terminal beings – and the future of our relationship to such beings – can help environmentalism develop a non-melancholic, non-salvific relationship to vulnerability and risk alike. What would our environmental practices look like, in other words, if we treated the planet as terminal, albeit within a radically different timescale than the one that defines a human lifespan? What if, rather than predicating environmental investment solely on trying to prevent harm – a tactic that often leads to our feeling like we have come to the problem too late – we acknowledged that relation, investment, and even improvement can be predicated on an acknowledgment of endings rather than existing in fear of or opposition to them?

To begin to articulate the important conceptual resonances between queer theory and environmentalism, and to develop a response to terminality that can sit beside and gently challenge environmentalism's salvific bent, there are any number of places we could turn. We could look to Paul Monette's acclaimed 1988 memoir *Borrowed Time*, the narrative of his final months with Roger Horwitz, his longtime partner who died of AIDS in 1986, and to Caroline Vaughan's 1996 book of photography by the same title, which juxtaposes photographs of seemingly pristine natural landscapes with images of elderly, gay, and cross-dressing couples.³ Both on their own and in conjunction with each other, these texts ask what possibilities for relation exist amidst terminality, and what the similarities may be between a place (or planet) persisting in or on "borrowed time" and a human being (or human couple) doing the same. And when juxtaposed, they might also force us to consider the place of form, genre, and reading practices in this conversation: how the photograph, as a static genre which inscribes no instructions for the temporality of its own observation, relates to and potentially complicates our relationship to the narrative, whose relative linearity and familiar modes of unfolding we too often take for granted. So too could we look to *Angels in America*, a text that, by virtue of the time of its writing and the time of its setting, intertwines portrayals of the HIV/AIDS epidemic with questions of prophetic temporality with references to the emerging discourse and growing problem of global climate change. Although the temporality of AIDS – and of AIDS-based terminality – has changed significantly since the play's 1991 debut, as Tony Kushner commented in a recent interview with the Los Angeles Times, *Angels in America* remains "scarily timely, in some ways that I wish it wasn't: the 'eco-cide' of global warming, the rise of the reactionary right

³ See Paul Monette, *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1988) and Caroline Vaughan, *Borrowed Time* (Durham & London: Duke U P, 1996).

in response to Obama's election, and the suicides and beatings of young gay men.”⁴ (Add to this the findings by a series of 2009 polls that a significantly higher percentage of Americans believe in angels than believe in anthropogenic global warming, and we have quite the political conundrum on our hands.⁵)

Or we could look once again to Sedgwick, whose writing was deeply attuned to questions of terminality (and terminal communities) even before she herself was diagnosed with the cancer that would ultimately take her life. Remarkably, her body of work treats terminality not an exceptional condition but rather an exemplary one, and not as a realm defined by dwindling time but rather *as itself a temporality* in which alternate forms of relation and ethical investment can be developed. In the “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” essay, for instance, terminality becomes less an acute condition than an ongoing state:

A more recent contingency, in the brutal foreshortening of so many queer life spans, has deroutinized the temporality of many of us.... I’m thinking, as I say this, of three very queer friendships I have. One of my friends is sixty; the other two are both thirty, and I, at forty-five, am exactly in the middle.... In a “normal” generational narrative, our identifications with each other would be aligned with an expectation that in another fifteen years, I’d be situated comparably to where my sixty-year-old friend is, while my thirty-year-old friends would be situated comparably to where I am.

But we are all aware that the grounds of such friendships today are likely to differ from that model....Specifically, living with advanced breast cancer, I have little chance of ever being the age my older friend is now. My friends who are thirty are equally unlikely ever to experience my present, middle age: one is living with an advanced cancer caused by a massive environmental trauma (basically, he grew up on top of a toxic waste site); the other is living with HIV. The friend who is a very healthy sixty is much the likeliest of us to be living fifteen years from now.

It’s hard to say, even to know, how these relationships are different from those shared by people of different ages on a landscape whose perspectival lines converge on a common disappearing point. I’m sure ours are more intensely motivated: whatever else we know, we know there isn’t time to bullshit. But what it means to identify with each other must also be very different. On this scene, an older person doesn’t love a younger as someone who will someday be where she now is, or vice versa. No one is, so to speak,

⁴ Patrick Pacheco, “Backstage: Tony Kushner,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 24, 2010.

⁵ For a summary of these findings, which were compiled from surveys conducted by Baylor University and the Pew Research Centre, see http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/12/07/food_for_thought.

passing on the family name; there's a sense in which our life narratives will barely overlap. There's another sense in which they slide up more intimately alongside one another than can any lives that are moving forward according to the regular schedule of the generations. It is one another immediately, one another as the present fullness of a becoming whose arc may extend no further, whom we each must learn to apprehend, fulfill, and bear company. (148-149)

I want to focus my discussion here on two main topics: first, the way in which terminality for Sedgwick becomes not simply a state but also a practice, and, second, the complicated – and importantly inclusive (or, to use one of Sedgwick's own terms, universalizing) – paradigms of belonging that inhere in this model of the terminal condition. First, it seems important to acknowledge the extent to which, throughout Sedgwick's work, attention to queer practices of reading is intertwined with attention to queer paradigms of relation, among which she counts the way in which the life trajectories of ill friends of different ages are unlikely ever to overlap. For Sedgwick in *Touching Feeling*, it's worth noting, friendships between the terminally ill – friendships “in which ... life narratives will barely overlap, [but also] ... slide up more intimately alongside one another than can any lives that are moving forward according to the regular schedule of the generations” – become an implicit model for or echo of the stance of the reparative reader, who resists “the dogged, defensive narrative stiffness of a paranoid temporality...which... takes its shape from a generational narrative characterized by a distinctly Oedipal regularity and repetitiveness” (147). Although Sedgwick likely would connect the two under the rubric of queerness – the “three queer friendships” embodying the “queer possibility...that... generational relations don't always proceed in... lockstep” – we may ask what would happen if we elided (or temporarily suspended) the middle man. What if to read reparatively, in other words, is not only to read queerly, but also to read terminally, or to read *as if* one were terminally ill? And what if terminality, in turn, were thought of not simply as a condition, but also as a deeply ethical – and importantly non-normative – practice in which we

all (regardless of our current health) could engage? This possibility leads me in turn to the second question introduced above, and to the matter of belonging and community. Here, I want to attend not to Sedgwick herself, and not to her friends living with terminal illness, but rather to the “very healthy” 60-year-old, who – amidst her health, amidst her prophesied longevity – remains a queer participant in these friendships, and remains a denizen of the terminal world. (In my formulation of this possibility, we might hear echoes of Susan Sontag’s claim, at the start of *Illness as Metaphor*, that we all carry passports for both the kingdom of the ill and the kingdom of the well.⁶) Terminality, in Sedgwick’s formulation, is the province not of individuals but rather of communities, and serves not as the end of or barrier to relation but rather as relation’s very ground. Like queerness itself, terminality here yields an alternative to normative family structures, normative identificatory paradigms, and normative modes of temporal unfolding. What new paradigms of agency and community might emerge, Sedgwick invites us to ask, if we treated terminality as a chronic condition that we all share?⁷

What Will Have Been: Terminal Genres, Terminal Futures

Although this may seem like a question produced in and solicited by its particular historical circumstances – inspired by a queer theorist writing several years into her own terminal illness, in a post-crisis moment when one can be said to be “living with HIV” or AIDS rather

⁶ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1978), 3.

⁷ Sedgwick’s late writings suggest, too, that terminality (in many senses of the word) can also be an optimal ground for activism and its attendant risks. Reflecting on her experience teaching at Hamilton College in its first years of co-education, she writes: “The result was that the small group of women faculty embarked together on an exhausting, but also immensely exhilarating, project of intensive education in feminist thought. We had to educate ourselves, our students, our colleagues, and our institution, all at the same time. One factor that made things easier was that many of us had been hired on a long-term (four years) but terminal basis – so there was nothing to deter us from taking professional risks in our adversarial relation to this college” (2011, 191).

than dying from it – I want to suggest that Sedgwick’s formulation is not without precedent, that the canon of American literature contains within it remarkable portraits of communities whose unity – and whose sense of collective agency – is predicated precisely on shared terminality. So let me now turn to an object of study which, in one noted scholar’s words, “in its isolation and decay gives off a luminous but pathetic (if not terrible) beauty -- the flush of dying”⁸ in another’s is simply “old and dying,”⁹ and in a third’s is “full of [traces] of an earlier prosperity, but now... [is in] decline.”¹⁰ These critics are Warner Berthoff, Ann Douglas (Wood), and Richard Brodhead, respectively, and their shared topic is a terminal being not human but rather cultural and geographic: the towns and ways of life portrayed in American Literary Regionalism. More specifically, all three refer to Dunnet Landing, and to *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, the text to which I want to return one final time as this project prepares to reach its own end.

Regionalism has frequently (even typically) been treated as a genre of the terminal, by the terminal, written for the sake of those who will survive or remain. Clinging to a fading way of life, the narrative goes, the female authors of regional and local color fiction seek to preserve in writing the traces or remnants of a culture that, however rich its past, has little in the way of a viable future. Donna Campbell suggests that, in its emergence “after the Civil War, a time when ‘[t]he country’s internal regulation of younger men and women to new urban areas has left behind a ghost world of spinsters, widows, and bereft sea captains,’ local color fiction celebrates the preservation, through writing, of the lives of humble, ordinary people in an environment threatened by time, change, and external disruption” (7-8). It is the prevalence of those spinsters,

⁸ Warner Berthoff, “The Art of Jewett’s Pointed Firs” (The New England Quarterly 32.1 [March 1959]), 51.

⁹ Ann Douglas Wood, “The Literature of Impoverishment: The Woman Local Colorists in America, 1865-1914” (Women’s Studies 1.1 [1972]), 28. Hereafter cited in the text.

¹⁰ Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 1993), 151. Hereafter cited in the text.

elderly and unmarried and non-reproductive, that makes the future both of Dunnet Landing and the regionalist literary tradition of which it partakes feel somewhat barren. As Caroline Gebhard points out, in accounts like Robert Spiller's influential 1946 *Literary History of the United States* "Jewett...becomes the dead end to New England's local-color tradition. According to this official version, Jewett (a spinster) could have no heirs."¹¹

Critical responses to regionalism's terminality, which read characters' response to cultural loss in terms reminiscent of our conventional response to environmental loss, have tended to go in two directions: either highlighting the texts' intense nostalgia for a bygone era, or asserting that writing itself – like the acts of canning and gathering and sewing that characterize daily life in Dunnet Landing – is a gesture of preservation that attempts to combat the passage of time. My aim is not to challenge the assumption that Dunnet Landing's economy, community, and characters are largely terminal, but rather to challenge the assumption that terminality is a condition of futurelessness. I also want to refute the notion that nostalgic gestures of preservation, saving (*this time in the sense of safe-keeping*) and mourning are the only acts that can be taken under such circumstances. More specifically, I want to suggest that attending to Jewett's portrayal of a spinsterly, elderly, terminal future – to the future of characters who seem to be dying and ways of life that seem to be dying out – might help us continue to rethink environmentalism's salvific imperative through a queer lens. Doing so might also help us to resituate regionalism itself within literary history: to treat these late-century sketches not as the end of a literary era, but rather as belonging to a genre that itself has a future, and that itself leaves an important political legacy, one potentially relevant today. Indeed, as we will see, Jewett's attention falls more often on forms of terminal community and agency, in keeping with

¹¹ Caroline Gebhard, "The Spinster in the House of American Criticism" (*Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 10.1 [Spring, 1991]), 18.

Sedgwick's model, than on the paradigms of saving and preserving to which critics of regionalism have been so committed for more than a half century.

Whereas Brodhead argues that regionalist fiction "[memorializes] a cultural order passing from life at that moment" (120), *Pointed Firs* itself eschews a concern with permanence and monumentality. The book is pervaded by a thematic, tonal, and narratological attention to the temporality and affects of the seasonal visit; the narrator, after all, is not a Dunnet Landinger, but a summer visitor, and the entire plot of *Pointed Firs* – such that one can even be said to exist – is predicated on a series of linked visits, both between the narrator and the region's denizens, and among those denizens themselves. In this, the text subtly introduces what we might deem an ethics of temporariness, an attention of what it means to persist and dwell together while always retaining an awareness of the fact that such relations are destined to come to an end. Indeed, as she prepares to leave Mrs. Todd's house as the summer comes to its close, the narrator, we might remember, equates her departure to a kind of death: "When I went in again the little house had suddenly grown lonely, and my room looked empty as it had the day I came. I and all my belongings had died out of it, and I knew how it would seem when Mrs. Todd came back and found her lodger gone. So we die before our own eyes; so we see some chapters of our lives come to their natural end" (130-131). Although the temporariness of the visit is not explicitly compared to the temporariness of a lifespan elsewhere in the book, much attention is paid to the fact that the present visitor will at some point be absent. Near the end of the narrator's visit to Green Island, when the narrator expresses a wish that she "could be here some Sunday evening," Mrs. Blackett responds that "William an' me'll be talkin' about you an thinkin' o' this nice day" (51). And, later, Mrs. Blackett prefaces another optative statement – "I want you to come again" – with a comment that not only inscribes the narrator's imminent absence but also places the

current visit already in the realm of retrospection: “I shall like to think o’ your settin’ here to-day” (54). In a culture whose prevailing actions are indeed those of remembering and storytelling, the fact that the visitors are there at times matters less than the fact that they *will have been there*, that the actions and conversations of the day will be available to retrospect. And yet the tonality of this future anterior rarely feels nostalgic, just as the acts of storytelling rarely feel monumental; rather, the gestures of turning back are always intertwined with and predicated on the unpredictability of the future, of the indeterminate and fundamentally unknowable context of that ever-prospective “will.” There is always an interplay, in other words, between embrace and relinquishment, between holding on and letting go. Stanley Cavell has deemed nostalgia “an inability to open the past to the future”;¹² *Pointed Firs*, by contrast, places the past perpetually in circulation; as stories of bygone moments become the ground for present-tense friendship and intimacy, they open themselves to the future and serve as the ground upon which relation is negotiated again and again.

Indeed, even what seem in *Pointed Firs* like the most straightforward moments of nostalgia, or like insistent gestures of preservation and monumentalization, often end up proving that the past itself is not a static or closed entity that can straightforwardly be carried into the future. The character most frequently deemed nostalgic by *Pointed Firs* readers and critics is, of course, Elijah Tilley; in his own words, “none on ‘em [the Dunnet Landingers] thought I was goin’ to get along alone, no way, but I wa’n’t goin’ to have my house turned upsi’ down an’ all changed about; no, not to please nobody. I was the only one knew just how she liked to have things set, poor dear, an’ I said I was goin’ to make shift, and I have made shift.... I do miss her... Folks all kep’ repeatin’ that time would ease me, but I can’t find it does. No, I miss her

¹² Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge & London: Harvard U P, 2005), 218.

just the same every day” (121). Whereas the lack of (or even resistance to) change evident in Tilley’s home and emotions and syntax alike suggest an insistent preservationist bent, a slightly later moment in the scene complicates this model by acknowledging that the past is not always identical to itself, that it is open to renegotiation and available for surprise. When Tilley takes the narrator into Poor Dear’s best room, he points to a shallow cupboard and says:

“That’s real chiny, all of it on those two shelves... There never was one single piece of it broke until – Well, I used to say, long as she lived, there never was a piece broke, but long at the last I noticed she’d look kind o’ distressed, an I thought ‘twas on account o’ me boastin’. When they asked if they should use it when the folks was here to supper, time o’ her funeral, I knew she’d want to have everything nice, and I said ‘certain.’ Some o’ the women they come runnin’ to me and called me, while they was takin’ of the chiny down, an’ showed me there was one o’ the cups broke an’ the pieces wropped in paper and pushed way back here, corner o’ the shelf. They didn’t want me to go an’ think they done it. Poor dear! I had to put right out o’ the house when I see that. I knowed in one minute how ‘twas. We’d got so used to sayin’ ‘twas all there just’s I fetched it home, an’ so when she broke that cup somehow or ‘noter she couldn’t frame no words to come an’ tell me. She couldn’t think ‘twould vex me, ‘twas her own hurt pride. I guess there wa’n’t no other secret ever lay between us.” (124-125)

Tilley’s words may call to mind Sedgwick’s reparative reader, who, “because [she] has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, [can also] entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did” (146). In a kind of inverse of this formulation, Tilley, by acknowledging that the past itself is open and contingent, may in turn train us (and the narrator, and his fellow Dunnet Landingers) how to live in the face of an terminal future. For if the terrain of one’s own history is not steady but steadily uncertain, if retrospect yields not a verifiable fact but merely an informed conjecture, and if the past, in keeping with the language of the passage, slips from an entity one “knew” and “knowed” to an entity one could only “guess,” then our neat division between nostalgia and anticipation, like our familiar definition of preservation, may no longer hold. The past and its apparent endings, in other words, function as a

space of possibility; in Dunnet Landing, characters must consistently reckon with and engage the uncertainties of what already has – *and* what already hasn't – come to pass.

Not only is the past in *Pointed Firs*, to once again borrow Cavell's wording, open to the future, but so too are those beings whose stance we most logically would expect to be insistently retrospective. Indeed, attention to the future is rarely ever missing in *Pointed Firs*, even as the narrator consistently engages with Dunnet Landing's most aged residents. The eighty-six-year-old Mrs. Blackett, remote and islanded and far from the social milieu of the mainland, is described upon the narrator's first encounter with her as "a delightful little person herself, with bright eyes and an affectionate air of expectation, like a child on a holiday" (37), and shortly later, as one who "took on a sudden look of youth; you felt as if she promised a great future, and was beginning, not ending, her summers and their happy toils" (40). Much has been made of the relative lack of children in Dunnet Landing, this ghost town of spinsters and seafarers; perhaps *more* should be made of the frequency with which the book's elderly characters are described as being child-like, as maintaining a posture of anticipation in the face of a future whose duration dwindles by the day. For while refusing to highlight children, the typical emblems of the future, the book insistently presents their unlikely surrogates or counterparts – the aging, fading members of an earlier generation, who insist upon their own futurity, their own capacity to intertwine retrospection and an awareness of their culture's fading with an ability – and eagerness, even – to look ahead.

As is perhaps implicit in the bearing of these childlike elders, Dunnet Landing also models alternate affective registers in which to live in and reckon with this terminal condition. For the *Pointed Firs* characters' relationship to the uncertain future – as to endings of various sorts – is not only open, but also affirmatively muted, insistently calm, and (I would argue)

importantly slow. Whereas Stephanie Foote, one of those who argues for *Pointed Firs* as an intensely nostalgic text, suggests that “amid even the slow cadences of life in the village, the narrator manages to impart a sense of urgency about her own project of collecting and arranging folklore and folkways” (20), we might instead once again take the text on its own terms, and read it within its own lexicon. For if we examine the slow cadences and tonality and pace of *Pointed Firs* sketches themselves, and carefully read their thematic and structural treatment of the way things end, what we can’t help but notice is a kind of attention to how things pass, and to how – amidst such passing – other relational and ethical possibilities emerge. As day begins to fade to evening on Green Island and the sea winds begin to change, Mrs. Todd simply “[nods] reassuringly and [keeps] to her steady plod, not quickening her gait” (50). In emphasizing Mrs. Todd’s plodding gait, and the non-plussed stance of the elderly Dunnet Landingers in the face of their individual and collective terminality, I mean neither to adopt a fatalistic attitude to the harm being done to the planet, nor to suggest that a cataclysmic end is inevitable and that we should simply develop forms of stoicism and kindness to occupy as we wait. In fact, quite the opposite: I want to suggest that by acknowledging the end as an extended temporality that we already inhabit, rather than that we are working to prevent, we might find our sense of agency, and the possibility for stewardship, expanded rather than delimited.

By understanding environmental activism less in terms of crisis, rupture, and radical discontinuity than in terms of a kind of perpetuity or *steadiness* (a word, borrowed from Jewett, that has both temporal and affective connotations), we might no longer be paralyzed – or intermittently mobilized – by fear, may no longer feel as if we are working in the face of an unknown enemy, in the face of a problem or end yet to come. Moving away from an emphasis on crisis, I want to argue, wouldn’t lead to our becoming less committed, but rather more; for within

the discontinuity model central to much environmental thinking, once crisis has been averted, once an endangered species has been saved or the planet has been passed into the hands of the “future generations,” activism loses its urgency and complacency, it seems, can return. If instead we acknowledge the myriad continuities between past, present, and future (even if that continuity, as in the example of Elijah Tilley, takes the form of a common unknowability), we might be better equipped to inhabit our own sense of agency – and our shared need for ongoing responsibility – when confronted with the realities of environmental degradation.

Attending to the fact that both terminality and responsibility are ongoing, it seems, might also help us more readily embrace the fact that both, too, are shared. And here we might turn to Jewett once again. For lest we still think, after all of this, that memorialization and monumentality are *Pointed Firs*’ privileged modes, it’s worth remembering Mrs. Todd’s insistence, when discussing Poor Joanna’s hermitage on Shell-heap Island, that “a growin’ bush makes the best gravestone” (68). For Mrs. Todd to comment on the utility of plants is not unusual; beyond being the narrator’s landlady and friend, she is also Dunnet Landing’s resident herb gatherer, the one to whom local residents turn for the kind of medical wisdom not offered by the town’s doctor. Just as the gathering of pennyroyal at one important juncture brings the narrator into a newfound intimacy with Mrs. Todd, the herbs – and herb gathering – that play such a central role in *Pointed Firs* more generally become the ground of social relation in the community. It is illness, in other words, that brings people together – that connects Mrs. Todd’s “kind, motherly voice” to the “anxious voice at the door speaking of a sick child,” that gives the narrator “a warm sense of comfort in the evident resources of even so small a neighborhood” (73). In the acknowledgment of weakness – “even so small a neighborhood” – comes the imperative for collective strength, and the avowed need for collective wisdom. It is through

vulnerability that the Dunnet Landingers establish commonality. And these connections are cyclical, or even perennial; Mrs. Todd's work is, we might argue, less salvific than reparative; her balms are not permanent cures but temporary fixes, holding damage at bay rather than precluding it once and for all. Indeed, the townspeople's stance toward terminality is not one of refusal or repression but rather of gentle acknowledgment; when the town's doctor sees the elderly Mrs. Blackett on the road to the Bowden family reunion, he clutches her wrist, feels her pulse, and proclaims: "You're wearing well: good for another ten years at this rate," using the same description for her body – worn – that the narrator earlier uses to describe the cases that hold the Blackett family's fading daguerreotypes. If the experience of the Dunnet Landingers as they move through the rigors of life on the Maine Coast is one of *wearing*, then Mrs. Todd's skill is to modify that verb adverbially, to ensure that they are *wearing well*; she does not halt the process of aging or decay, but rather changes its tonality, alters the experience of the trajectory if not the trajectory itself. (It might be worth acknowledging here that pennyroyal, the plant around which the narrator's excursion with Mrs. Todd centers, is best known as an abortifacient. It is this herb designed to preclude the bringing of life that brings the narrator and Mrs. Todd to an unprecedented level of closeness.)

What brings regional communities together, then, is not just a quest for health, but also a respect for death, a fact that has been used to bolster a critique of regionalism as politically regressive. In the inaugural issue of the journal *Women's Studies*, published in 1972, for instance, Ann Douglas argued that "in the last analysis, [the regionalist writers] were corpse watchers. They were half in love with *what* it was their fineness to know were rotting timbers and bare and beautifully bleached bones: impoverishment was the legacy they left" (32). Where this formulation makes corpse watching a symptom of the demise (and fruitlessness) of this

particular literary mode, we might consider instead how corpse watching can be the occasion for intimacy, can bring people together into paradigms of relation where saving is not on the table and yet meaningful futures and ethical patterns of investment are constantly being built. For not only is corpse watching precisely the practice dramatized and celebrated in Jewett's 1888 short story "Miss Tempy's Watchers," in which two women grow fond of one another as they keep watch over the body of their mutual friend on the eve of her burial, but the deathbed is also the privileged or defacto setting of much of the queer literature written in the final decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, we might see the kind of terminal community that regionalism exemplifies, and thus catch a glimpse of one of regionalism's own futures, in these bedsides and gravesides of AIDS patients portrayed in American literature from the 1980s. The question these texts force us to consider is not whether there will be corpses to watch, or whether we will – at one juncture or another – find ourselves watching them; rather, regionalism urges us to acknowledge that saving is not the only way to make things better, or to make life – however long it lasts – livable, viable, and meaningful. And so we might find in literary regionalism – this most unexpected of sources – an important model for a non-salvific model of care, for a set of practices that manages to understand stewardship outside the rhetoric of saving, and to cultivate forms of communal and planetary investment that exist outside of – and persist beyond – the temporality of crisis in which the environmental movement so deeply invests.

No Future; or, How to Make Friends with the Terminally Ill

I want to turn briefly now, by way of a conclusion that perhaps opens more than it culminates, to the place where we began, and a topic that may seem odd in the wake of discussions of terminality and corpse-watching: the status of children in environmental thought.

As we have seen, children traditionally serve as the trump card in the pocket of mainstream environmentalists for the way in which they both embody the future to which we all are supposed to look and exemplify the blameless innocence that we are jeopardizing through our own thoughtless practices. It is in the name of this innocence and vulnerability that environmentalist parents often advocate protection above all else, a stance exemplified by work like Steingraber's. Rather than engaging further with *Raising Elijah* here, I want simply to ask a structural and social question that the book does not permit: What happens when harm has already been suffered? What happens when prevention is no longer the primary order of the day?

For answers, we might turn to the case of the terminally ill child, that being who dwells in a beginning that also functions as an end. In contrast to that Tiny Planet t-shirt with which we began, emblazoned with the confident slogan "I am the future," a recent op-ed in the *New York Times* presents a far different – and importantly startling – model of child-rearing, terminality, and environmentalism. In "Notes from a Dragon Mom" by Emily Rapp, a woman whose 18-month-old son has Tay-Sachs disease, the writer admits that she and her husband "never thought about how we might parent a child for whom there is no future."¹³ As she reflects, "Parenting advice is, by its nature, future-directed. I know. I read all the magazines... [The philosophy] is animated by the idea that good, careful investment in your children will pay off in the form of happy endings, rich futures. But I have abandoned the future.... Our experiences have taught us how to parent for the sake of parenting, for the humanity implicit in the act itself, though this runs counter to traditional wisdom and advice." Although Rapp's parenting unfolds in what seems to her to be a radically non-normative temporality that alienates her from familiar models of stewardship, her approach to child-rearing seems to have much in common with Mrs. Todd's

¹³ Emily Rapp, "Notes from a Dragon Mom," *The New York Times*, October 15, 2011.

approach to herb-gathering and herb-proffering. For the spinster's difference from the worried mom – the difference between the “kind, motherly voice” and the “anxious voice at the door speaking of a sick child” – may be the difference between Emily Rapp and the more conventional, future-oriented moms from whom she distinguishes herself. For her proprietary grip on her son and his future has been forcibly loosened by terminality; in “giving [her] a terrible freedom from expectations,” and in giving her a “day-to-day” that, precisely in and through its pain, remains “peaceful, even blissful,” illness turns parenting not into a dyadic or nuclear relationship between parent and child but rather into a more impersonal, and perhaps more broadly applicable, mode of investment concerned with humanity itself.

“Nobody asks dragon parents for advice,” Rapp says. “We’re too scary. Like Dr. Spock suddenly possessed by Al Gore, we offer inconvenient truths and foretell disaster.” I want to suggest that environmentalists, whether parents or childless, whether straight or spinsterly or queer, may be well-served to ask the dragon mom for advice, to attend to terminality as a lifelong condition, and not always to insist upon harm and weakness and vulnerability as phenomena that can be prevented. For not only is harm at times inevitable, but the immunitary paradigm that would seek to protect and prevent above all else also threatens to cordon off, insulating neighbors from one another, and from the forms of mutual assistance, shared vulnerability, and collective agency that *Pointed Firs*, among other regional texts, so effectively and importantly models.¹⁴ Separating futurity from life, or from vitality itself, may (ironically?)

¹⁴ Here, we may hear echoes of biopolitical thought, especially the work of Roberto Esposito. In *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (trans. Timothy Campbell, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008) he argues that “the immunitary paradigm” exists in “contrastive symmetry with the concept of community.” As he goes on to elaborate: “Tracing it back to its etymological roots, *immunitas* is revealed as the negative or lacking [*privativa*] form of *communitas*. If *communitas* is that relation, which in binding its members to an obligation of reciprocal donation, jeopardizes individual identity, *immunitas* is the condition of dispensation from such an obligation and therefore the defense against the expropriating features of

be the best way to forestall the apocalyptic end or planetary death that environmentalists (and, indeed, many of us) most fear. Rather than aiming to save, in other words, our task may be to train ourselves and each other how to steward within this terminal temporality. And here, for a final time, we might once again hear an echo of Sedgwick's reparative stance which, aligned as it is with the Kleinian depressive position, seeks neither to ignore nor even necessarily to obviate the fact either of pain or of risk. As Ellis Hanson suggests in a tribute written after Sedgwick's death, her work "offers us a creative ethics of care that *assumes in advance that the news is usually bad*.... Faced with the depressing realization that people are fragile and the world hostile, a reparative reading focuses not on the exposure of political outrages that we already know about but rather on the process of reconstructing a sustainable life in their wake."¹⁵ Whereas we think of sustainability as being an insistently future-oriented stance, Hanson's interpretation of Sedgwick, like my reading of *Pointed Firs*, suggests that environmental futurism (and, perhaps, environmental no-futurism) is operative only when it looks back, to our legacy of harm, sideways, to the fact our common present always exists in the wake of a complicated past, and ahead, to a common future that may best be understood as an ongoing end. A queer environmentalism that took its cues from Sedgwick, from American literary regionalism, and from the dragon mom, I thus want to suggest, would seek less to save the planet from a single, cataclysmic end, than to embrace the ethical and practical demands posed by the multiple endings that condition our experience of the everyday. Such an environmentalism might prepare

communitas" (50). "The negative of *immunitas* already fills our entire frame: in order to save itself unequivocally, life is made 'private' in the two meanings of the expression. It is privatized and deprived of that relation that exposes it to its communal mark" (61).

¹⁵ Ellis Hanson, "The Future's Eve: Reparative Reading After Sedgwick" (*The South Atlantic Quarterly* 110.1 [Winter 2011]), 105.

us not only to make friends with the terminally ill, but also to acknowledge the extent to which each of us, in fact, already has.

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